

## DISCERNING GOD'S LEADING

### “if any of you lack wisdom, ask of God”

(see also #306, #307, #803)

#### Key question

How can a Christian come to understand God's leading in this life?

#### Key text

### James 1:5-8

“But if any of you lacks wisdom, **let him ask of God**, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him **ask in faith** without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, {being} a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

#### Introduction

1. Virtually every story in the Bible involves man's decisions to do right or wrong.
  2. **The traditional view of discerning God's will for one's life.**
    - a. **Premise:** For each of our decisions God has a perfect plan or will.
    - b. **Purpose:** The goal of the believer is to discover God's individual will and make decisions in accordance with it.
    - c. **Process:** The believer interprets the inner impressions and outward signs through which the Holy Spirit communicates His leading.
    - d. **Proof:** The confirmation that one has correctly discerned the individual will of God comes from an inner sense of peace, an agreement of all the signs, and outward (successful) results of the decision.
  3. Is the traditional view of God's will correct?
- A. **Reexamining the evidence for the view that God will supernaturally reveal a specific plan for each believer's life.**
1. **The model of parental guidance**
    - a. **Gal. 4:1-11**

“1 Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. 3 So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. 4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. 8

However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. <sup>9</sup> But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? <sup>10</sup> You observe days and months and seasons and years. <sup>11</sup> I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.”

- b. How should we expect a loving heavenly Father to relate to His children?
  1. Should we expect that He tell us exactly what to do in every situation?
  2. Should we expect that He give us direction and principles through which we would grow in wisdom?

## 2. The key to fruitfulness

### a. Joshua 1:7-8

“<sup>7</sup> Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. <sup>8</sup> This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”

- b. The key to success is not always being in the right place at the right time.
- c. The key to fruitfulness is being faithful and wise where we are.

## 3. The inner promptings of (?)

### a. I Cor.12:1-3

“<sup>1</sup> Now concerning spiritual {gifts,} brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. <sup>2</sup> You know that when you were pagans, {you were} led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. <sup>3</sup> Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed;” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”

- b. Very few people testify to a consistent record of knowing God's will through dramatic inner prompting or “a still small voice.”
- c. Impressions can come from so many sources other than God's Spirit.

## 4. The Biblical examples

### a. Were not the Biblical characters led in specific details?

1. In many cases there was direct personal guidance.
2. It is interesting to note that there is no indication that it was ever presented as “God's individual will” for a person.
3. The number of recorded cases is not sufficient to constitute normative experience for every believer.
4. Most of the recipients of specific guidance occupied a special place in the outworking of God's program.
5. The examples of direct guidance are limited to a few decisions and these examples do not apply to all of life's choices.
6. In most cases there was a supernatural revelation of God's will that could not be mistaken.

### b. SUMMARY

1. Direct, supernatural guidance for specific decisions was the exception to the rule.
2. Direct guidance was given to people who played a strategic role in the drama of world evangelization.

3. Direct guidance was provided only at critical points in Israel's history and during the formative years of the church.
4. Direct guidance was always communicated by means of supernatural revelation.

**B. Reexamining Scripture used to teach that we are to expect guidance regarding an individual will for our lives?**

1. **Prov.3:5-6** "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight."
  - a. "He will make your paths straight" is a Hebrew expression which means "your life will have success."
  - b. This passage speaks of God's blessing on those who trust Him. It does not imply that there is a specific path carved out just for them.
2. **Ps.32:8** "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you."
  - a. Again, the "way which you should go" refers to the course of life one should follow.
  - b. The King James Version's translation "I will guide thee with mine eye" is misleading and has been corrected by newer translations.
3. **Isa.30:20-21** "Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, He, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher. And your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left."
  - a. The translators have capitalized "Teacher" and "He" suggesting that God is in view. It is more likely that a prophet of God is referred to. One who would give Israel moral guidance. (The context Isa. 30:1-26 suggests that God would bless Israel with the voice of the prophet when they repented.)
  - b. The fact that they would see as well as hear their teacher suggests that a human figure was in view.
4. **Col.1:9** "for this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding."
  - a. The context (vs.10-12) makes it clear that it is God's moral will that is in view, not an individual plan for the believer's life.
  - b. Parallel passages support the fact that it is God's moral will that is in view. (Eph.4:1; I Thess.2:12; 4:1-3; II Cor.5:9-10; Rom.14:18; Eph.5:10,17)
5. **Other N.T. passages** (Rom.12:1-2; Eph.2:10; 5:15-17; Col.4:12) fall into the same category — the moral will of God, not the individual will of God.

**C. Applicational difficulties of the traditional view**

1. **Anxiety** is often the logical result when I cannot know for sure that I am in God's will.
  - a. Can I ever know for sure that I have found God's will for my life?
  - b. Most folks admit that they cannot know for certain.
2. **Frustration** can result when I do not always get a clear reading of the signs.
  - a. How does one avoid the frustration of not being able to get a clear reading on God's will?
  - b. What do I do when the signs change?
3. **Ordinary decisions** are made without giving attention to this view.

- a. At some point, everyone abandons the traditional view's approach to making decisions.
  - b. We might use it for important decisions (like who I marry or where I live) but not for ordinary decisions (like what I wear today or how I get to work).
4. I may have several **equal options**.
- a. Insistence upon only one "correct" choice generates anxiety over missing "the perfect will of God" rather than gratitude for more than one fine opportunity.
  - b. The signs are seldom pointing in the same direction. Which signs do I give the most value to?
5. The traditional view can promote **immature decisions** —
- a. By permitting believers to justify unwise decisions on grounds that "God told me to do it."
  - b. By fostering costly delays because of uncertainty about God's individual will.
  - c. By influencing people to reject personal preferences when faced with apparently equal options.
  - d. By encouraging the practice of "putting out a fleece" — letting circumstances dictate the decision.
6. **Subjectivity** in reading the signs or sensing the inner promptings of the Spirit is unavoidable.
- a. How can I be certain that an inner impression is from God and not from some other source?
  - b. What do I do with changing impressions?

## The Way of Wisdom

### Introduction

1. God's will is to be viewed in a number of different ways.
  - a. His **DETERMINED WILL** or His **SOVEREIGN WILL** is that which is preordained and mysterious to us until after the fact.
  - b. His **DECLARED WILL** or His **MORAL WILL** is that which is expressed as His desire for what people should believe and how they should act and why they should do so.
  - c. His **DYNAMIC WILL** or His **CHANGING WILL** is that response to our actions that is in keeping with the personal interrelationship between God and His people (who are free moral agents).
  - d. His **DETAILED WILL** or His **PERSONAL WILL** is that specific life plan for an individual. It is this expression of God's will that we are examining.
2. The following statements summarize my understanding.
  - a. Where the declared will of God is known, it should be followed by God's people.
  - b. In those areas where the Scripture gives no command or principle (no moral direction), the believer is free and responsible to choose any one of a number of options.
  - c. In making decisions on non-moral issues, the believer is called to exercise wisdom and spiritual common sense.
  - d. In some unusual circumstances God's Spirit may guide an individual to specific decisions. This is not the norm; it cannot be demanded and should not be expected.
  - e. In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the outworking of God's sovereign will as it touches each decision.

**A. Where the declared will of God (moral issues) is known, it should be followed.**

1. **The declared will of God** is the expression, in behavioral and attitudinal terms, of God's character.
  - a. The essence of God's moral will is — love.
  - b. This love is defined by the moral instructions of Scripture.
  - c. This love is modeled by Jesus.
2. **The declared will of God** touches every aspect and moment of life: goals, attitudes, and means (why, how, and what).
  - a. **Mandates** (normative and universally applicable)
    1. Our callings or goals
      - a. Exalting Christ as Creator, Redeemer, and Lord
      - b. Exemplifying the values of His Kingdom
      - c. Edifying His body — the church
      - d. Evangelizing His world
    2. Our attitudes or motives
      - a. Love, not selfishness — Mk.12:28-31; Rom.13:14; 14:13-19; I Cor.13:1-3
      - b. Reliance, not independence — Prov.3:5-6; Gal.5:16
      - c. Humility, not pride — Jas.4:6; Phil.2:5-8
      - d. Gratitude, not presumption — Col.3:17
      - e. Clear conscience, not guilt — Rom.14:22-23
      - f. Integrity, not irresponsibility — Col.3:17,22
      - g. Diligence, not laziness — Col.3:23
      - h. Eagerness, not compulsion — I Pet.5:2
      - i. Generosity, not stinginess — I Tim.6:17-19
      - j. Submission, not domination — I Pet.5:5-6
      - k. Courage, not cowardice — Jn.16:33; Matt.10:26-28
      - l. Contentment, not greed — Heb.13:5; Phil.4:11
  - b. **Principles** (applied by individuals in individual circumstances)
    1. The principle of Glory to God (I Cor.10:31; Rom.15:6)
    2. The principle of Liberty (I Cor.6:12; Gal.5:13)
    3. The principle of Expediency (I Cor.6:12)
      - a. In relation to self —
        - 1) Conscience (Rom.14:22-23)
        - 2) Control (I Cor.6:12)
      - b. In relation to others —
        - 1) Selflessness (I Cor.10:24; Phil.2:3)
        - 2) Love (I Cor.8:13; Rom.14:15)
          - 1) Not to cause a brother to stumble (I Cor.8:13)
          - 2) Not to cause an unbeliever to stumble (I Cor.10:27)
        - 3) Union (Rom.15:5-6; I Cor.1:10; II Cor.13:11; I Pet.3:8; Col.3:14; Eph.4:3)
  - c. **Examples:**

1. Christ (Rom. 8:29; I Pet.2:21; Jn.13:15)
2. Old Testament (I Cor.10:6; Jude 7; Jas.5:10)
3. Saints (I Pet.5:3; I Tim.4:12; Phil.3:17; 4:9; I Cor.4:16)

3. **The declared will of God** is fully revealed in Christ through the promises of Scripture. II Pet.2:3-4

- a. The correct understanding of the Scripture is not always the simplistic reading of Scripture.
  1. The role of the teacher is to be respected.
  2. The insights of the whole community of believers are to be respected.
  3. The experiences of life are to be respected.
- b. It is all too easy to read into Scripture our cultural and personal biases.
  1. Cross-cultural exposure can be helpful.
  2. Perspectives from different points in history can be helpful.
  3. Humility is always in order.

4. **The declared will of God** is able to equip believers for every good work. II Tim.3:16-17

**B. In those areas where the Scripture gives no command or principle (no moral direction), the believer is free and responsible to choose any one of a number of options.**

1. **Rom.6:14** “you are not under law, but under grace.”

- a. Living under the new covenant means that many things are lawful (I Cor.6:12; 10:23), clean (Mk.7:19; Rom.14:14,20), and pure (Titus 1:15).
- b. The principles of love (Rom. 14; I Cor.8) and new life in Christ (Rom. 6) constrain our freedom.

2. **Rom.4:15** “Where there is no law, neither is there violation.”

3. ILLUSTRATIONS:

- a. **Marriage** — I Cor.7:39 “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”
- b. **Giving** — II Cor.8:13 “For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality”
- c. **Sabbath** — Rom.14:5 “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”

4. St. Thomas Aquinas defined three aspects of moral decision making.

- a. **ACTION** — objective behavior.
- b. **MOTIVE** — subjective intent.
- c. **CIRCUMSTANCE** — situational context.

5. NOTE: **All three factors must be morally right for a response to be good.**

- a. **LEGALISM** — respects only the first. “What does the law tell me to do?”
- b. **SUBJECTIVISM** — respects only the second. “If my motives are right, I’m OK.”
- c. **SITUATIONALISM** — respects only the third. “What is appropriate in my life may be inappropriate in yours. There is no common standard.”

**C. In making decisions on non-moral issues, the believer is called to exercise wisdom and spiritual common sense.**

1. We are to make decisions by applying wisdom to life's challenges.
  - a. **Eph.5:15-16** "Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but **as wise**, making the most of your time, because the days are evil."
  - b. **Col.4:5** "Conduct yourselves **with wisdom** toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity."
2. **ILLUSTRATIONS:**
  - a. **I Thess.3:1-2** "Therefore when we could endure it no longer, **we thought it best** to be left behind at Athens alone; and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith."
  - b. **Phil.2:25-26** "But **I thought it necessary** to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick."
  - c. **I Cor.16:3-4** "And when I arrive, **whomever you may approve**, I shall send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and **if it is fitting for me** to go also, they will go with me."
  - d. **Acts 6:2-4** "And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. **But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom**, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.' "
  - e. **Acts 15:28-29** "For **it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us** to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell."
  - f. **Acts 16:10** "And when we had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, **concluding that God had called us** to preach the gospel to them."
  - g. **I Cor.6:1-6** "If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say {this} to your shame. {Is it} so, {that} there is not among you **one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren**, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?"
  - h. **I Cor.7:32-35** "<sup>32</sup> But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; <sup>33</sup> but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, <sup>34</sup> and {his interests} are divided. And the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. <sup>35</sup> **And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and {to secure} undistracted devotion to the Lord.**"
  - i. **I Cor.7:39-40** "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, **she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion** she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God."
3. **How does one acquire wisdom?**
  - a. The attitude that fosters wisdom
    1. **REVERENCE**

**Prov. 9:10** “The **fear of the Lord** is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

2. **HUMILITY**

**Prov.11:2** “When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the **humble** is wisdom.”

3. **TEACHABLENESS**

**Prov.9:9** “**Give instruction** to a wise man, and he will be still wiser, teach a righteous man, and he will increase his learning.”

**Prov.15:31** “He whose **ear listens** to the life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.”

**Prov.19:20** “**Listen to counsel** and **accept discipline**, that you may be wise the rest of your days.”

4. **DILIGENCE**

**Prov.8:17** “I love those who **love** me; and those who **diligently seek** me will find me.”

5. **UPRIGHTNESS**

**Prov.2:7** “He stores up sound wisdom for **the upright**; He is a shield to those who **walk in integrity**.”

6. **FAITH**

**Jas.1:5-8** “But if any of you lacks wisdom, **let him ask of God**, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him **ask in faith** without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, {being} a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

b. The proper approach

1. **PRAYER** (Ask God for it)

**Jas.1:5-6** “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him **ask of God**, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him **ask in faith** without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.”

2. **SCRIPTURE** (Know the Bible)

**Ps.119:97-100** “O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day. **Thy commandments make me wiser than my enemies**, for they are ever mine. I have more insight than all my teachers, for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, because I have observed Thy precepts.”

3. **GENERAL INFORMATION** (Become informed)

**Lk.14:28-32** No one builds without counting the cost.

4. **COUNSELORS** (Draw on the experience and insights of others)

**Prov.11:14** “Where there is no guidance, the people fall, but in **abundance of counselors** there is victory.”

**Prov.13:20** “He who **walks with wise men** will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”

**Prov.15:22** “Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with **many counselors** they succeed.”

5. **EXPERIENCE** (Learn from life itself)

**Prov.30:24-28** “Four things are small on the earth, but they are exceedingly wise: The ants are not a strong folk, but they prepare their food in the summer; the badgers



are not mighty folk, yet they make their houses in the rocks; the locusts have no king, yet all of them go out in ranks; the lizard you may grasp with the hands, yet it is in kings' palaces."

**Heb.5:12-14** "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who **because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.**"

**D. In some unusual circumstances God's Spirit may guide an individual to specific decisions. This is not the norm; it cannot be demanded and should not be expected.**

**E. In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the outworking of God's sovereign will as it touches each decision.**

1. **Eph.1:11** God "works **all things** after the counsel of His will."

2. **Deut.29:29** "The **secret things belong to the Lord our God**, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law."

3. **ILLUSTRATION:**

a. **Acts 2:23** "This {Man}, delivered up by the **predetermined plan** and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put {Him} to death."

b. **Acts 4:27-28** "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, **to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.**"

4. **NOTE:** There are certain things that God has revealed through prophecy and promise that give us a hint about what is in His plan.

5. **God's sovereignty does not exclude the need for planning; it does require humble submission to His will.**

**Jas.4:13-16** "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.' Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, '**If the Lord wills**, we shall live and also do this or that.' But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil."

6. **Circumstances define the context of the decision and must be weighed with wisdom . . . not "read" as road signs to God's individual will.**

**Eccl.11:5-6** "Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, **for you do not know** whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good."

7. **Open doors are God-given opportunities for service . . . not specific guidance from God requiring one to enter.**

**Col.4:3** "Praying at the same time for us as well, that God may **open up to us a door for the word**, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned."

**II Cor.2:12-13** “Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when **a door was opened for me** in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.”

8. **“Putting out a fleece” is an invalid practice that should not be trusted.**

**Judges 6:36-40** “Then Gideon said to God, ‘If Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou has spoken, behold, **I will but a fleece of wool on the threshing floor**. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken,’ And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. Then Gideon said to God, ‘Do not let Thine anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground.’ And God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground.”

**F. Discerning God's Will Together:**

**Discovering a Process of Leadership Discernment**

by Ruth Haley Barton

It was a conversation similar to many I have had with Christian leaders. A pastor from a large church was telling me that his church was going through a major transition as its leaders tried to respond to the growth they were experiencing. They had outgrown their facility (a good problem to have!) so the obvious question was: “Will we add on to our facility or will we start another church?”

But clearly this was only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface larger questions lurked: What should be our emphasis now? Does our mission still capture what we feel called to? Is the leadership structure effective for what is emerging now? Can we keep going this way or will we burn ourselves out, adding a building campaign and more people and activities to our plates?

Sensing the weight that this pastor was carrying, I probed a little deeper and asked, “How are you going about answering these questions? Does your leadership team have a clearly articulated process for discerning God's will in these matters?” A look of disorienting awareness crossed his face as he realized that the answer to the question was no. After recovering a bit, he added “But we always have a time of prayer at the beginning of our meetings.”

**Understanding Spiritual Leadership**

Many of us have a vague idea that there should be something different about our leadership as Christians—particularly if we are leading a church or Christian organization—but the truth is that the difference usually gets reduced to a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting and sometimes even that gets lost in the shuffle! What is it, then, that distinguishes spiritual leadership from other kinds of leadership?

The heart of spiritual leadership is discernment: the capacity to recognize and respond to God's will both personally and in community. This is much easier said than done. Discernment requires us to move beyond our reliance on cognition and intellectual hard work to a place of deep listening and response to the Spirit of God within us and among us. It is one thing to rely on what feels like such a subjective approach when it pertains to one's personal life, but it's much riskier when our decisions involve large budgets, other people's financial investments, the lives of multiple staff, reports to

high-powered boards, and serving a customer base with its expectations. Is there a trustworthy process for actively seeking God relative to decisions we are making?

The practice of corporate discernment, like any other Christian discipline, is a means of creating space for God's activity in our lives, making ourselves available so that he can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The spiritual leader is distinguished by his or her commitment and ability to guide the discernment process so everyone can affirm together a shared sense of God's desire for them and move forward. Through the practice of discernment in community we open ourselves to the wisdom of God that is beyond human wisdom but is available to us when we ask for it. But discernment does not take place in a vacuum nor by accident. We must first cultivate an environment in which discernment can take place and then enter a process that enables us to actively seek God's will in the decision that we face.

### **Cultivating an Environment for Discernment**

Romans 12:1, 2 indicates that the ability to discern the will of God is a natural by-product of spiritual transformation in community. Paul says, "Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." Therefore, a community that is dedicated to spiritual transformation provides the environment in which discernment takes place. We cultivate this environment as we commit ourselves to spiritual disciplines, personally and together, that enable us to keep offering ourselves to God for the work that only he can do.

*Discernment takes place in the community of those who are committed to spiritual transformation.*

When the leaders launching the Transforming Center began meeting together, we gathered first on the basis of our desire to experience spiritual transformation in the context of community. This desire led us to establish rhythms of prayer, Scripture reading, self-examination and confession, solitude and silent listening, worship and intercession that called forth our own transformation. It was out of our commitment to be together in ways that were spiritually transforming that we began to discern a calling to do something together. It is only as we have struggled to stay true to our own process of spiritual transformation that we have continued to discern what our calling is and stay true to it. We continue to discover, sometimes painfully, that when our commitment to basic spiritual disciplines in community slips, we become muddled in our capacity to be truly discerning: rather than acting from a clear sense of God's desire for us we become driven by our own agendas, rather than experiencing God's peace we become frantic, rather than finding clarity we become lost in a swirl of inner and outer chaos.

### **Entering into the Process of Discernment**

As we cultivate an environment in which discernment can take place, we notice that it begins to happen naturally. However, there are also times for decision-making that call for intentionality and focus in actively seeking God's will. During such times the spiritual leader calls people into the spiritual practice of discernment. Discernment as a spiritual practice is not mechanical nor is it always linear. As we become more comfortable with the process we experience it not so much as a step-by-step procedure but as a creative mix of these dynamic elements:

**Ask the right question.** Not all questions warrant a full discernment process. Some questions, such as choosing a computer system, might be answered with a 15 minute, fact-filled discussion.

However, there are other questions that require a different level of attention and prayerfulness from the entire leadership group. Even when we think we know what the question is, there might be a larger question lurking underneath it that holds even greater significance for us.

A church's question about the building project might deepen into a question about mission and values and whether a new building might or might not help us stay true to these. What starts out as a meeting to set strategy gives way to the deeper question of whether we are pushing our own agenda or whether God is really opening up new opportunities. What begins as a question about event scheduling raises a more far-reaching concern about pace of life and whether or not we are working and living together in such a way that we honor true human limitations and create space in our lives for loving God and others. Thus, discernment begins with listening for the deeper question.

**Involve the right people.** It is amazing how we can become so stuck in organizational "silos" that we overlook those who might have important contributions to make to the discernment process. In addition to the obvious (the board, the staff, the management team) we might consider: Who else has gifts of wisdom and discernment that we value? Who has information and experience that might help us? Who has influence that might be able to help us communicate the outcomes of our process to others in an inviting way to the larger community when the time comes?

**Establish guiding values and principles.** Discernment with others at the leadership level requires an extraordinary amount of safety in each other's presence along with great clarity about what values govern the process. For the Transforming Center, there are certain values that we have agreed together we will not violate for any reason no matter how expedient it might seem. One of these values is our commitment to trustworthy relationships in community. We have agreed that learning to come together and stay together in unity is our first and most enduring task as we pattern our relationships after Christ's commitment to his own disciples. We do not just assume these things; we talk about them and seek to live into them with great vigor and intent. This means that we are also committed to telling the truth. Beyond the kind of maneuvering and posturing that often takes place in leadership settings, we believe God works through all truth—even truth that seems like it might slow us down or complicate matters or take us into uncharted territory—to bring forth the gift of discernment. Even when the truth is hard, we take great pains to affirm the courage that it takes for each one of us to bring the truth that God has given us to the discernment process. When any one of us has deep reservations or resistance to a particular direction or decision, we trust the Spirit of God in that person and wait for deeper understanding and unity. We have never regretted the decision to honor each other in this way. In fact, God has often used this principle to save us from ourselves! Over time we have come to understand that when we compromise basic values for any reason we have compromised our essence and then we do not have much that is of value to offer others.

**Pray without ceasing.** Discernment requires much more than a perfunctory prayer at the beginning of a meeting. In fact, it involves several kinds of praying throughout the entire process. When the question for discernment has been clarified, the community for discernment assembled, and guiding principles have been established, we can begin with a prayer of quiet trust like the one found in Psalm 131 in which the Psalmist acknowledges his utter dependence upon God in the face of matters "too great and too marvelous for me." A different kind of spirit descends upon us when we enter into decision-making from this stance. When we sense that the process is getting out of hand, that human dynamics are distracting us from real issues, that we are stuck, that we are applying nothing more than human effort to the decision at hand, it can be very helpful for the leader to call the group back to this prayer of quiet trust along with a little time for silence. This gives us the opportunity to shift back into a position of trust rather than human striving.

We need to also pray for indifference. This is not the kind of indifference that we associate with apathy; rather, it is the prayer that we would be indifferent to everything but the will of God. This can be a very challenging prayer for us to pray because oftentimes we enter into decision-making with strong opinions and more than a little self-interest. Indifference in the discernment process means that I am indifferent to matters of ego, prestige, organizational politics, personal advantage, personal comfort or favor, or even my own pet project. "God's will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else." This takes time, for there is often a death to self that is required before we can see God's will taking shape in our lives. But it is well-spent, because otherwise the discernment process becomes little more than a rigged election!

When we have reached a point of indifference, we are finally ready to pray for wisdom which God promises to bestow on us generously when we ask. The prayer for indifference is an important prerequisite to the prayer for wisdom because the wisdom of God is often foolish to man; indifference to matters of our own ego, in particular, prepares us to receive this gift.

**Listen.** At the heart of the discernment process is the choice and the ability to listen on many levels. First of all we must listen deeply to the experience (s) that caused us to be asking this question in the first place. When the New Testament believers were faced with the question of whether or not Gentiles should be required to be circumcised in order to be saved, they entered into a time of deep listening: to the conversion experience of the Gentiles, to the perspectives of the people who were with them, to the questions and debate of the Pharisees, to Peter's sense of personal calling to the Gentiles, to Paul and Barnabas' descriptions of signs and wonders, to James' exposition of Scripture connecting this experience to the words of the prophets in the Old Testament. Finally, out of all that listening James dared to state what he felt God was saying in it all: that they would not impose any further burden on the Gentiles beyond the essentials of the faith. The listening process had been so thorough that when James summarized it so succinctly, it was clear to everyone that the wisdom of God had been given.

This story illustrates that the discernment process involves a major commitment to listening with love and attention to our experiences, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit deep within ourselves and others, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to pertinent facts and information, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions, to that place in us where God's spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true. When we embark on a true discernment process, we ask: What voices do we need to hear and how do we make sure that we hear them?

Select an option that seems consistent with what God is doing among you. Discernment does not always come with as much clarity as it did for the New Testament church. When it's not clear, you might select an option or two, seek to improve upon those options so that they are the best they can possibly be and then weigh them out to see which one seems most consistent with what God is doing among you. Questions that help us to weigh out these alternatives are: What is the thing that God is making natural and easy? What brings a sense of lightness and peace even in the midst of challenge? Is there an option that enables us to do something before we do everything?

**Seek inner confirmation.** Sometimes in the excitement of a meeting we can get somewhat carried away by what is happening in the moment. We might need to allow people some time apart from the group to become quiet in God's presence, to pray and think, and to notice whether they are at peace with the decisions being made. It is good to take a break (a few minutes, an hour, a day, or even a week) and come back together and check in with each other to see what God is saying to them in their quiet listening. If people are experiencing deep, inner peace with the options you are exploring,

then affirm that together. If anyone is still having reservations or experiencing questions or resistance, honor them by listening to what it is they are experiencing and see what God has to say to you in it. Perhaps one element of a particular option that needs to be tweaked or perhaps a larger adjustment needs to be made. Trust God to work through this person's hesitation.

**Agree together.** Once the leadership group has thoroughly explored the different options, hopefully there is a clarity that emerges which points towards one of the options or some combination of the options as particularly graced by God with wisdom and truth. This is the time when those responsible for providing leadership look at each other and say, "To the best of our ability, we agree that this particular path is God's will for us so this is the direction we will go." Then we rest in God, thanking him for his presence with us and for the gift of discernment as it has been given.

Now it's time to move forward into planning and implementation, confident, that "the one who has called you will be faithful to bring it to pass."

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### The Point

While God can lead us through dramatic supernatural revelation, His Spirit more often works through less dramatic spiritual wisdom.

## Response

### Head

#### I am to understand that:

God most often guides me by giving me wisdom to make sound decisions.

### Heart

#### I am to believe that:

God can and does work through both mundane and dramatic ways.

### Hands

#### I am to behave by:

Seek and act on the basis of wisdom when there is no dramatic special revelation.