

How Can I Know God's Will?

by Andreas Dura, from *Youth Ministry*, March 2005

Before we answer this question in detail, we first need to consider the subject of general and specific orders. A few examples will help to explain the difference. Let's consider a general order:

Mark 16

¹⁵ Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

In order to fulfill this general order, we need specific orders:

1. How should we go? As missionaries, doctors, preachers, book evangelists, or what?
2. When should we go? Now, or in a few weeks or months or longer?
3. If we are to go into the whole world, where should we begin? At home or abroad?

Questions like these need answers before we can fulfill the general orders.

Another example is Israel's taking possession of the promised land. God gave Israel their general order:

Numbers 33

⁵³ You shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land and dwell in it, for I have given you the land to possess.

In this verse the exact time of the conquest is not stated. It also does not say which city would be first to be conquered, which one last, and so on. The details which characterize specific orders are not given here.

So how can I know what are God's personal or specific directions to me? How shall we know if God is speaking to us?

It seems to be hard enough to understand God's general or-

ders, for one person sees them one way and another person sees them another way. But the difficulties seem to be even greater when we consider God's specific orders!

Witnesses to Confirm God's Will

In order to communicate His will to us, God gives not just one witness, but several. If we make decisions based upon one witness only, it is easier to be deceived. For this reason, the Word of God advises us to obtain more witnesses. This principle is revealed in the following texts:

Deuteronomy 19

¹⁵ One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.

Deuteronomy 17

⁶ Whoever is worthy of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses, but he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness.

Numbers 35

³⁰ Whoever kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses; but one witness is not sufficient testimony against a person for the death penalty.

Paul understood the principle contained in these texts when he said:

2 Corinthians 13

¹ This will be the third time I am coming to you. By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.

And Jesus Himself told His disciples to act according to this principle:

Matthew 18

¹⁶ But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

Several Independent Witnesses

When witnesses to an accident are heard in court, the judge makes sure that they are not relatives. This is to avoid the danger of collaboration. Likewise, as we try to determine God's will, it is necessary that the witnesses are independent of each other and do not influence each other. In this respect we need to make a distinction between objective and subjective witnesses.

Objective Witnesses

Objective witnesses are not dependent upon me. They come from outside of me, and are not influenced by my feelings, impressions, thoughts, desires or fears. In this category fall: the principles of the written Word of God, the principles of the message, and the counsel of experienced brethren and sisters.

Subjective Witnesses

Subjective witnesses are directly involved with me, for they are dependent upon my perceptions, way of thinking, and memory. In this category fall my past experiences, the circumstances through which it appears to me that God is leading me, and the impressions of the Spirit. Our consciences and dreams also fall into this category.

We will now consider these different ways through which God leads us.

The Written Word

The first and foremost means God has of communicating with us is His Word, His written Word. I want to emphasize the fact that His Word takes first place above all other means of communication.

The written Word is also called the Bible, the Word of God, the Book of books, the Good Book, and similar names. Our heavenly Father uses this Book to communicate His will to us.

In this Book are contained many principles which are essential to our success in determining whether any given thing is God's will for us or not. The Bible and its principles are independent of our feelings and principles. This is what makes them objective. We cannot influence them or change them.

Can we influence the written Word? Can we change it? Can we cut it out? There are plenty of other Bibles which say the same thing even if we tear a page out of our Bible. Even if we change the translation in one place and make it as we want it, there are other translations that say the right thing. In other words, even if one translation isn't right, there are plenty of other translations with which to make a comparison. There is no possibility of shaking up the Word of God. His Word is solid.

In the first chapter of Revelation we read,

Revelation 1

³ Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it, for the time is near.

What thought is behind the expression, "he who reads"? John did write down what he saw in the vision and sent it to the elders, or angels, of the seven churches. They in turn were to read it to the members. Back then there were no print shops, so everything had to be copied by hand. Before that happened, it was read to the whole group. This is similar to when I receive a letter from a brother or sister who is not here, and read it to all of you. In this case, however, we are talking about the written Word of God. This Word must be read just as it is written. That is the thought being expressed in *Revelation*.

You can't say just anything. You have to say what is written. Whoever reads or hears the word is blessed. By expressly stating that those who read and hear are blessed, God is showing us how important the written Word is. The responsi-

ble persons were not told to read the letter to themselves and explain it to others. No, they were to read it to the others and they should listen. This shows how important the Word is.

We understand that the Holy Spirit inspires the words read so that they become effective. When Jesus read the Word in the synagogue at Capernaum, the Holy Spirit could work, and thus the Word became a moving power to the listeners. (see *The Desire of Ages*, p. 74)

God gives a serious warning to those who think they can change the Word by adding or taking away anything from it.

Revelation 22

¹⁸ For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book. If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book.

¹⁹ And if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the book of life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

It is expressly stated here that no one has permission to add or take away anything from the Word. This means that if someone wants to pass on the Word, then he must read it and the others must listen. The Word cannot change. It must stay as it is, for God has given it. It is His Word, and it is the highest and most important of all of God's ways of communicating with us.

By His own life Jesus demonstrated how important the Word is. When He was asked,

Luke 10

²⁶ "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He answered, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?"

When Jesus directed the people to the Word for the answer to the important question of how to obtain eternal life, as well as answers to all other questions, He was telling us how im-

portant this Word is. Through His example Jesus Himself emphasized the importance of the written Word.

What a blessing to have something that we can see and grasp! Here is a means of communication that everyone can see and understand.

Even though we cannot change the Bible as such, we can distort its meaning. Sentences can be taken out of context and combined with other texts to prove whatever a person wants.

Testimonies for the Church, vol. 5, p. 264

The Bible presents a perfect standard of character; it is an infallible guide under all circumstances, even to the end of the journey of life. Take it as the man of your counsel, the rule of your daily life.

When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness he misquoted God's word by omitting an important phrase. He said:

Matthew 4

⁶ He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

But he missed out the essential condition

Psalms 91

¹¹ ...to guard you in all your ways.

It can require some thought to work out what is wrong. For this reason it is important to understand the principles of the Word which are objective and unchangeable. Therefore we speak of the principles of the Word as an objective witness. An example of such a principle is, "You shall not kill." Another one is the fact that Jesus is the only way to the Father, and so on.

The Laws of Nature

The same is true of the laws of nature. We cannot change them. The principles governing the operations of nature belong in the category of objective witnesses. But we are not

talking about the teachings which we can draw from nature. These belong to the subjective category.

The Principles of Our Message

The written Word of God requires interpreting. There are many interpretations around today, and this is why there are so many churches and religious groups. Our church's interpretation of the Word is contained in the principles of our message, as far as we understand them.

From the Word of God we receive the principles of our message. By studying these we are able to grasp what God is telling us for our time. These principles are the second means of communication. In all cases our message must be tested by the Word, and not the Word by our message. The written Word is the standard of comparison for all the principles we learn.

The principles of our message we also cannot change, for they are given us in His way. He is the Teacher of His people, and we do not receive our message through the will or wish of man, but rather because He is leading. We cannot influence our message either. We could try to tell someone that he should preach this or not preach that or we could threaten not to come if something is preached. Such attempts have been made but without success, and I hope that they will always be unsuccessful.

We have the freedom to say that we won't accept something, but, nonetheless, the principles of our message will continue to be preached anyhow, whether we want it or not, and whether it pleases us or not. In this regard we have no influence. The message doesn't always make us feel good, in fact, sometimes it crosses our feelings quite seriously.

The Word is sufficiently explained by the present truth. I would like to emphasize sufficiently. That means that not everything will be explained. There will be things that we won't

understand. There will always be something that we won't understand, and to meet this, the light will always grow. But we are given as much understanding as we need, and if we still become confused and say that we need more, then that is our fault. This happens when we don't submit to the message and study it and understand it correctly.

Paul once said,

Galatians 1

⁸ But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach any gospel to you other than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

Thus he declared that the principles of the message, which he, under the influence of the Spirit, preached to the Galatians, stood higher than his own opinion. If Paul were to come to the church later and give counsel based on his feelings which contradicted the principles of the message, then they should reject what he said.

The message we have learned has a very high place, and there is the danger that we will lower its level of importance, that we will raise other things above it, such as our past experience, circumstances, the impressions of the Spirit, and sometimes even the counsel of experienced brethren. If this happens, then it takes some time before everything is put back into order.

Sometimes people get completely confused and say, "Now I don't understand anything anymore." Then you must ask a few questions. What does the message say? What have we learned? What are the principles? Then suddenly we break through the confusion, the jumble of thoughts and impressions, and we can see light again clearly. This has often happened. You hear some advice from over there, and some from over here, you get this impression and that impression, but the Word which we have learned through the message is in itself clear and important. We must measure ourselves accord-

ing to this Word.

It is therefore very important that we really appreciate the message that God has given us, that we adjust our thinking to fit in with it. We need to often ask ourselves if our thinking is in harmony with the message which God has given us. If we do this, we cannot go wrong.

The Counsel of Experienced Brethren

After we understand the principles, we have our experiences with them. These experiences are reflected in the counsel of experienced brethren. What does experienced mean? It means experienced in the message.

It is important that we don't simply look for brothers or sisters who just say what we want to hear. God has placed in the church particular people who have been around for a while and have a solid experience in the message and know how to apply it correctly. Over the years they have had many experiences with the message, and they have also witnessed many developments from which they have amassed quite a treasure of experiences. If I seek counsel from such ones, I can only win.

Furthermore, their counsel is not dependent upon my feelings or impressions, and therefore it is more objective. This counsel is very important and holds a high place as one of God's means of guiding us. God speaks through experienced brethren. Of course this counsel needs to be in harmony with the message, but when that is the case, then it is very important that we heed this counsel.

Our human nature has the tendency to be independent. To work against this, God has given us the counsel of experienced brethren. He is trying to help us trust self less and others more, even more than ourselves. This thought is confirmed in the following statement:

The Acts of the Apostles, p. 163

God has made His church on the earth a channel of light, and through it He communicates His purposes and His will. He does not give to one of His servants an experience independent of and contrary to the experience of the church itself. Neither does He give one man a knowledge of His will for the entire church while the church—Christ's body—is left in darkness. In His providence He places His servants in close connection with His church in order that they may have less confidence in themselves and greater confidence in others whom He is leading out to advance His work.

Unfortunately, history reveals the constant tendency of God's people to be independent, even though they hurt themselves and the church as a result.

Proverbs 11

¹⁴ Where there is no counsel, the people fall. But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.

Proverbs 15

²² Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counselors they are established.

Proverbs 24

⁶ For by wise counsel you will wage your own war, and in a multitude of counselors there is safety.

Proverbs 12

¹⁵ The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise.

Proverbs 19

²⁰ Listen to counsel and receive instruction, that you may be wise in your latter days.

Proverbs 27

⁹ Ointment and perfume delight the heart, and the sweetness of a man's friend does so by hearty counsel.

The Acts of the Apostles, p. 163

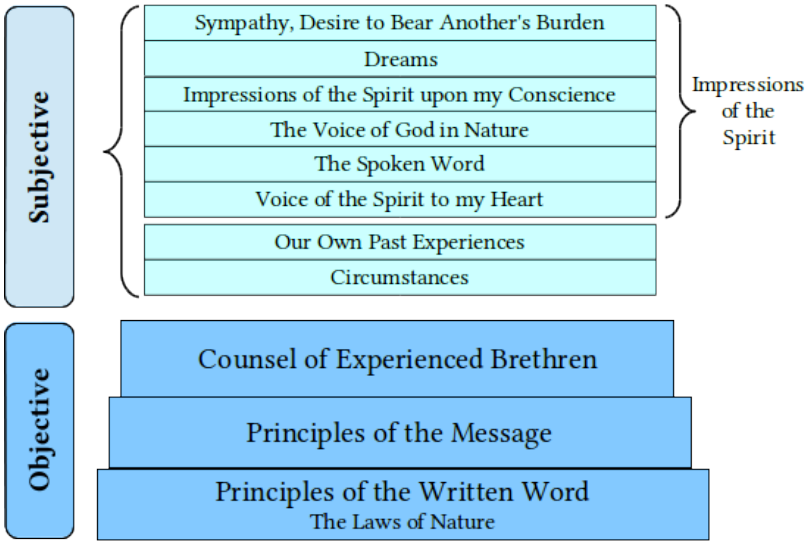
There have ever been in the church those who are constantly inclined toward individual independence. They seem unable to realize that independence of spirit is liable to lead the hu-

man agent to have too much confidence in himself and to trust in his own judgment rather than to respect the counsel and highly esteem the judgment of his brethren, especially of those in the offices that God has appointed for the leadership of His people. God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God.

Each of us needs to see clearly that we are in great danger of being independent of the church and following a way of our own choosing.

The Acts of the Apostles, 164

Those who are inclined to regard their individual judgment as supreme are in grave peril. It is Satan's studied effort to separate such ones from those who are channels of light, through whom God has wrought to build up and extend His work in the earth. To neglect or despise those whom God has appointed to bear the responsibilities of leadership in connection with the advancement of the truth, is to reject the means that He has ordained for the help, encouragement, and strength of His people. For any worker in the Lord's cause to pass these by, and to think that his light must come through no other channel than directly from God, is to place himself in a position where he is liable to be deceived by the enemy and overthrown. The Lord in His wisdom has arranged that by means of the close relationship that should be maintained by all believers, Christian shall be united to Christian and church to church. Thus the human instrumentality will be enabled to co-operate with the divine. Every agency will be subordinate to the Holy Spirit, and all the believers will be united in an organized and well-directed effort to give to the world the glad tidings of the grace of God.



Why did God set up a system whereby He speaks to us through experienced brethren? He could speak to us some other way. He could speak to us personally. But why did He do things this way? So that we would trust less in self. That is obviously the reason given here. This way of revealing truth to us effectively destroys bad tendencies in us. We love to trust ourselves. But we should trust less in ourselves and more in those who have been called to advance God's work and who have experience in the message. This is a big step for us to take. This doesn't mean just a little bit of trust. It means that I objectively put more trust in what the experienced brethren say, than I do in what I say.

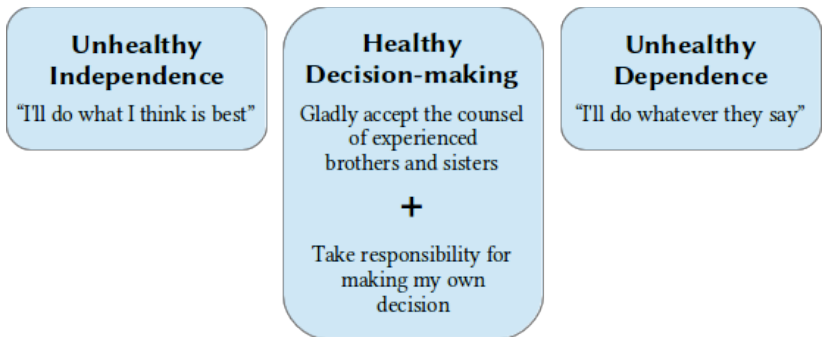
If I despise the voice of counsel speaking to me through experienced brethren, then I will also despise the voice speaking to me through the written Word and the message.

Can we really do this? Naturally the prerequisite is that the counsel of the experienced brethren must be subservient to the message and the written Word. But only when we have the attitude here described, can we make any real advance-

ment. God is able to use this means only when we trust others more than ourselves. If we don't, then He cannot use this means, and something essential will be missing from our lives. It would be as if I really wanted to give you the message, but you didn't want to hear and stepped outside. Will God then give you the message in another way? Will He then speak to you personally? He won't do any of this. To receive the message, we must trust others more than ourselves. I would like to say again, that this is not easy to do, but it is the way things are in God's kingdom.

We have considered the fact that God's people tend to trust themselves more than they trust experienced brethren. But there is also the opposite extreme to consider: that of servile dependency.

Many young people expect to be told exactly what to do. They want to be told everything in order to avoid being held responsible if anything goes wrong. If something does go wrong, they immediately say that they only did what they were told and blame the others for the mess. Such servile dependence is extremely unhealthy. We must learn to take on responsibilities and make decisions for ourselves. For example, in the case of a young man choosing a wrong profession, the experienced brethren who know this youth can step in and advise, but the final decision and responsibility for all consequences rests with the youth himself.



The Desire of Ages, p. 668

But we are not to place the responsibility of our duty upon others, and wait for them to tell us what to do. We cannot depend for counsel upon humanity. The Lord will teach us our duty just as willingly as He will teach somebody else. If we come to Him in faith, He will speak His mysteries to us personally.

In Summary

How thankful we can be for such a means of communication that cannot be influenced by our feelings or wishes or ways. The more we give ourselves over to this system of receiving light, the more we love this voice, the better God can speak to us through this means.