

# Discerning the will of God<sup>i</sup>

Pastor Dan Hoffman (July, 2015)

## Two points of confusion to understand before beginning to discern God's will:

First when people talk about the "Will of God" they often confuse the two different kinds of "will". First there is the "**Will of Decree**" – what God determines happens. This "will" cannot be thwarted (Creation Gen 1:3; Salvation Gal 4:4-5). God's will of decree is generally unknown to us (Deut 29:29) except in very unique situations, and there is no promise in the Bible that we are able to know God's will of decree though there are situations where God did reveal His will of decree (think OT prophets). Then there is the "**Will of Desire**" – God desires many things to happen but allows sin to thwart His desire (2 Pet 3:9). God's will of desire is clearly laid out for us in the Bible and includes receiving God's gift of grace and then living a life that continually conforms to Christ. The confusion comes when we try to seek God's will of decree the way we should seek God's will of desire. We can easily know His desire and indeed this is our principle responsibility as Christians, but He (not us) is in charge of giving us insight into His will of decree and we cannot expect this.

Most Christians who seek God's leading do this because the things they are facing are not spelled out for us in God's general will of desire: things like who should I marry, where should I go to school etc. While in the OT people did seek God's divine direction (will) and obtained it through divination (prophets, Urim and Thummin, sacred lot, dreams, signs, and audible words), once Christians received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) there are no reference to Christ-followers seeking God's will this way again. Instead Christians are called to discern wisely using the Mind of Christ that we have been given (1 Cor 2:6-16).

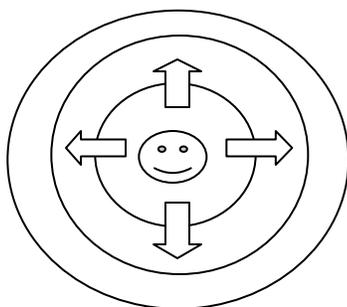
Discernment then is the process by which we gain clarity in the midst of turmoil and to choose the best course of action in the midst of multiple opportunities. Discernment is not about divining "God's specific will for your life" as it is not ours to know for certain the mind of God (Is 55:8). A wise decision, not the secret knowledge of God about your future, is the goal of this process.

The second point of confusion when it comes to discerning God's will has to do with a misunderstanding of the **General will of God** and the **Specific will of God**.

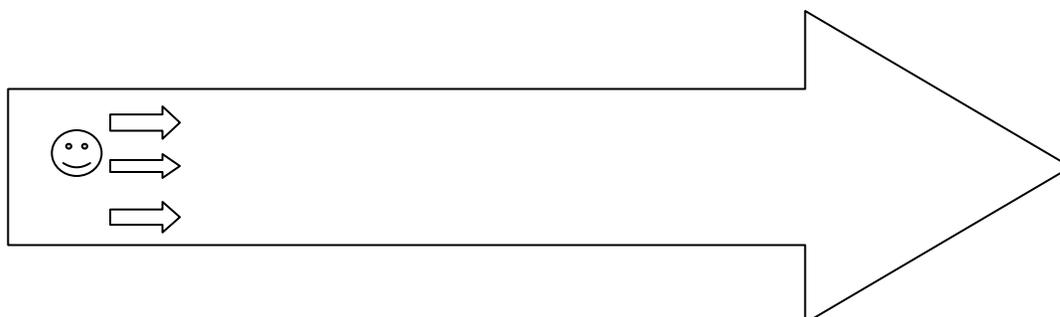
**General will of God**-(Micah 6:8) 99.9% of the time we as Christians live here. The job of a Christian is to reflect Jesus to the world around them, to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. Particular locations or activities don't matter as long as we desire to reflect Christ then we are free to pursue the desires of our hearts. Any careers we may choose or countries we may decide to live in exist comfortably within God's general will for us. There is no second best! **There is no "center" or "first best"** to choosing to reflect Christ, we either desire are doing it or we are not. These are not matters of obedience or disobedience, but rather choices between two spiritually neutral actions.

### God's general will

Not this!



But this!



**Specific will of God**-(Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus) A few times in history God superseded His general will and called people to something more. Things like building an Ark, writing down His law, sacrificing Isaac, being the Savior of the world are not things that “normal” people are called to do. In the Bible the people who God called with His *specific will* rarely questioned if they were in fact hearing God, (Gen 6:14, Gen 22:3, Ex 20) instead when God called them to do something other than what He had called everyone else to do, they only struggled with whether or not they wanted to be obedient. We don’t need to worry about missing God’s specific will for our lives. If He has one, we will know about it!

***Situations we find ourselves in***

This brings us to the question of discernment and making wise and God-honouring decisions. Throughout the day we find ourselves faced with countless decisions. Some of these are urgent and demand our attention, others are non-urgent and can be put on the back burner or forgotten about. As a result many of our decisions are made based on how pressing the situation is. But in fact there is another aspect to decisions and that is where discernment comes into play.

**Urgent important** – emergency situations (no discernment necessary – JUST ACT!)

**Urgent unimportant** –things that demand our attention but aren’t important (like TV watching)

**Non-urgent important** –we often end up procrastinating on these decisions (*use discernment on these decisions*)

**Non-urgent unimportant** –we use these things to procrastinate.

	<b>Urgent</b>	<b>Non-Urgent</b>
<b>Important</b>	<b>ACT NOW!</b>	<b>Discern Here</b>
<b>Non-Important</b>	<b>These two boxes are where we waste time</b>	

**Other general things to consider as you prepare to discern.**

-It is wise only to make decisions from within a place of consolation. Consolation exists when we are in a state of general peace and not under stress. If at present you are in a place of desolation (the opposite place) and are unable to escape, it is wise not to decide to do something other than what you previously decided in your last period of consolation. Instead choose to maintain your previous decision. Don’t allow stress to dictate your life decisions.

-Discernment is only useful for choosing between two equally viable choices. Viable choices are first ones that do not involve moving a person into sin, and second are ones where both the alternatives are possible to the person making the choice. Decisions involving sin call not for wisdom but for obedience while false decisions with only one viable option are not decision at all and call for forbearance and endurance.

-As you embark on this process intentionally choose not to have your mind made up one way or the other as you begin. This is difficult and requires intentionality, but without this there is no point to this process.

-Don't seek to rush through the discernment process, but rather approach this with an intentional decision to find peace. Wisdom is found in the midst of consolation.

As you begin, take time to dedicate this process to God in prayer – really! While there is certainly secular worth to this process, the primary significance of these steps comes from the fact that the question in question is being considered by a man or woman who desires to find the will of God in their life. (Psalms 1; Proverbs 3:19-26; Proverbs 1:7)

**1.) Thankfulness** – Experience God's love by spending some time listing the areas of where you have seen God's faithfulness, provision and blessing in your life.

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**2.) Repentance** – Do you have unrepentant sin in your life? Ask God to reveal areas of sin, acknowledge the wrong, accept responsibility, ask for mercy, and confidently receive God's forgiveness.

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**3a) The one decision being considered** – Experience the illuminating power of truth. Narrow your decision down to one yes/no question. Often we face multiple decisions, but these should be tackled one at a time. For example "Should I quit my current job to become a writer?" should be treated as "should I quit my job?" and then "should I pursue writing as my source of income?" Deciding between multiple things at the same time does not lead to clarity. Write the one decision to be made down and ask Jesus for clarity as you discern His will.(Is 40:1-11, 58 or Phil 1-4)

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**3b) The logical side** – list the pros and cons of taking the course of action listed above. Limit your pros and cons to things you *know* will happen if the considered course of action is taken. Only use positive statements on either side. So if your pro is "If I do this then I don't have to move" then actually that is the con "I would have to move."

Pros	Cons

**4a) The Emotional Side** – Name all your fears associated with taking the considered course of action. Fears are things that might happen (as opposed to things that *will* happen and are pros or cons) if the considered course of action is taken. As you name them consciously decide not to be motivated by them. Fear comes from the Devil never from God. (2 Tim 1:7). For example a fear might be “I might not be able to get as good a paying job if I quit this one.”

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**4b) Make a Preliminary Decision** – based on the pros and cons and the fears which are no longer influencing you decide whether or not to proceed with the course of action described above.

It seems good to me and to the Lord \_\_\_\_\_

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**5.) Accountability and Insight** – Present your decision to 2 to 3 people who know you and ask them to discern with you whether your decision seems wise to them. List the people you will submit this decision to. (Prov 22:7)

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**6.) Submit yourself to act** on the wisdom of the community.

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<sup>i</sup> Based on Gordon Smith’s “A Day Alone with the Lord”