

COUNSELING THOSE WHO ARE MAKING IMPORTANT
DECISIONS: SOME PRACTICAL HELPS

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Counseling Those Making Important Decisions	2
Question #1: Is It My Primary Desire to Please and Glorify God?	4
Question #2: Do I Have Any Sinful Desires Involved?.....	5
Question #3: Do I Recognize that God is Absolutely Sovereign?.....	6
Question #4: Will I Cause a Brother to Stumble?.....	8
Question #5: Will I Have a Clean Conscience if I Do This?.....	9
Question #6: How Can I Honor God <i>While</i> I Perform This Action?.....	9
Conclusion	11
Bibliography	13

Introduction

What should I do? Which job should I take? Who should I marry? Should I pursue this job? Should I go this party? These are all questions that people – even Christians – face and are confronted with the choice of which decision to make. Biblical decision-making¹ is something that is, unfortunately, an often neglected tenet of biblical counseling. Biblical decision making is the presupposition of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture² to lead the regenerate believer in God to make choices in life – no matter how significant or insignificant they may be – which are God-focused and intended to bring Him the greatest honor and glory.³ The grave necessity for the counselor to be skilled in the Word of God and knowledgeable so as to counsel the counselee as to how to make right choices is something that is often overlooked.⁴ The psalmist believed this as he wrote: “Your testimonies also are my delight; They are my counselors” (Psa 119:24).⁵

¹ This is closely related to the concepts of discernment and the will of God. For helps on discernment see John F. MacArthur, *Reckless Faith: When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994); and Jay Adams, *A Call to Discernment: Distinguishing Truth from Error in Today's Church* (Eugene: Oreg.: Harvest House Publishers, 1987). For a helpful work on the will of God see the excellent work by Garry Friesen, *Decision Making & The Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, Oreg.: Multnomah Press, 1982); James C. Petty, *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 1999); and the practical work by Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

² On the issue of the sufficiency of Scripture for counseling, see the helpful section by Howard A. Eyrich and Bruce L. Strickland, “Counseling the Decision Makers,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 1, no. 1 (1977): 27-28; See also Alvin L. Baker, “Knowing the Will of God: Toward a Practical Theology, Conclusion,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 8, no. 2 (1986): 17. Baker writes: “Biblical guidance ... is found exclusively in Scripture [and] ... when believers are faced with difficult decisions, believers need to ask for wisdom to apply the Word (James 1:5)” (Ibid., 17-19). Obviously, this relates to the “more sure prophetic word” in 2 Pet 1:19. For a great article on this, see D. Edmond Hiebert, “The Prophetic Foundation for the Christian Life: An Exposition of 2 Peter 1:19-21,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141, no. 562 (Apr/Jun 1984): 158-68.

³ This is very closely related to what Jay Adams calls “spiritual discernment.” He defines spiritual discernment as: “a habit formed by using Scripture under the Spirit’s power and direction to distinguish good from evil. Like any other habit of mind, it is established by regular, repetitive action” (*A Call to Discernment*, 81).

⁴ Obviously, this excludes the notion that God’s will is “mystical.” For such theories and rebuttals against these theories, see Martin E. Clark, “Myths of Career Choice,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 5, no. 2 (1981): 15-

By way of introduction and however obvious it may seem, the biblical counselor *must* make certain the counselee is a believer⁶ and is pursuing Christlikeness with his life to the glory and praise of God. If there is one thing that surely cannot be done, it is trying to diagnose a spiritually dead person with the spiritual truths of God's Holy Word.⁷ Indeed it is true that if a person has not repented of his sin and turned to Christ, that all counseling is "pre-counseling," namely, evangelistic counseling! The first order of business for this person is to be spiritually alive so he can understand the truths of God's Word (cf. 1 Cor 2:14; cp. Rom 8:8; 1 John 2:20, 27).

Counseling Those Making Important Decisions

It is important for the counselor to recognize that he must not *make the decision* for the counselee. Rather, he must equip the counselee with the necessary tools so that when situations come up again in life (and count on it – they will!), he will be adequately prepared to assess the situation and make a God-honoring decision. However, if the counselor merely tells the counselee what to do and makes the decision for him, the counselee is in no better condition because when a circumstance comes up in the future they will be ill-equipped and unable to

19; and Arthur L. Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988): 70-77.

⁵ All English Bible quotations will be from the New American Standard Bible (1995 Updated Edition), unless otherwise noted.

⁶ By a person being a believer, I simply mean: A person who: (1) Recognizes his own sinfulness and wretchedness before a Holy and Righteous God; (2) Recognizes the just penalty that he deserves in hell forever separated from God because he has transgressed God's perfect Law and is, by nature, dead in sin; (3) Has called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for Salvation, by faith, in recognition that Jesus Christ – the God-Man – came to this earth, lived the perfect life in obedience to the Father, and died upon a cross in order to atone for sins as the substitute of the sinner who believes in Him; (4) Has repented of His sin and is committed to a lifelong pursuit of Christlikeness and holiness as a "new creation."

⁷ Which, as 1 Cor 1:18ff declares, is absolute foolishness (μωρία) to the "world."

handle the situation on their own. Essentially, what this means is that the counselee must practice 2 Timothy 2:2: “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” So the chain goes as follows: from the counselor, to the counselee (who in turn makes the decision on his own and learns how to make wise, godly, Bible-based decisions) who can in turn teach others with what he has learned from the biblical counselor.

But the question is still posed: “How does a counselee make a Godly decision?” Or, “What criterion can the counselee bear in mind when various situations and opportunities arise so he can please God with his life” (cf. Rom 14:8; 2 Cor 5:9)? This paper serves to help the counselee⁸ learn how to make biblical decisions in life. There is no “standard” or “norm” when it comes to this kind of issue, but here is one method of doing so.⁹ The rest of the paper will pose six practical questions¹⁰ that the counselee can ask himself in order to diagnose the heart issue, the motives, the perspective of God in the picture and the decision’s effect upon others.¹¹

⁸ And, of course, the counselor so he is adequately prepared to handle counseling cases that may arise along these lines in the future.

⁹ For another clear and simple way of “how-to” make biblical decisions, see Dave Swavely, *Decisions, Decisions: How (and How Not) To Make Them* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 2003), 99-170; see esp. the helpful chart on p.98 on “Making Biblical Decisions.”

¹⁰ These questions are designed to dig deep into the counselee’s heart in order to find out the *true* heart motivation of the decisions. These questions deliberately exclude areas such as “feelings” or “desires” because there are more fundamental heart attitudes that need to be addressed. Therefore, these six questions are to help one search his own heart and ascertain if the motivation for making certain decisions is grounded in self-serving (“idolatrous”) motives or in God-centered motives.

¹¹ This paper presupposes the notion that the decision which needs to be made is *not* one directly addressed in Scripture. If it is directly addressed, then it is agreed that whatever the consequence may be, Scripture – as the final authority – *must* be followed. So, again, this paper relates to those situations (“gray areas”) that are not directly dealt with in the Scriptures. Additionally, this paper also presupposes that prayer is an essential tenet of the process constantly – from beginning to end.

Question #1: Is It My Primary Desire to Please and Glorify God?

Obviously the first prerequisite for a believer in making a Godly decision is searching the Scriptures and zealously endeavoring to find God's heart on the matter at hand – whatever that may be.¹² Just as God acts on account of “His Name” (2 Sam 7:13; Isa 66:5; Ezek 20:44), so also the counselor ought to live life not for his own honor but for the honor of His Creator, God (Rom 15:6; 1 Cor 6:20; 1 Pet 4:16). 2 Corinthians 5:9 is especially pertinent in this regard. It is this person who seeks primarily in his life to *please* and glorify God who will make God-centered choices. Indeed, “to ‘please the Lord’ well summarizes the Christian’s life, and is to be understood as doing good and avoiding evil.”¹³ This is how the apostle Paul prays in Colossians 1:10: “so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects” (cf. 2 Tim 2:4).

The heart's cry of the counselee when a decision has encroached ought to be that of the psalmist when he exclaimed: “I will give thanks to You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, And will glorify Your name forever” (Psa 86:12). The fundamental reality here is that the counselee must have a desire to please and glorify his Master and King (2 Tim 2:4).

¹² MacArthur notes along these lines: “True discernment requires diligent study of the Scriptures ... No one can be truly discerning apart from the mastery of the Word of God. All the desire in the world cannot make you discerning if you don't study Scripture. Prayer for discernment is not enough. Obedience alone will not suffice. Good role models won't do it either. Even the Holy Spirit will not give you discernment apart from His Word. If you really want to be discerning, you *must* diligently study the Word of God (*Reckless Faith*, 87-88; emphasis added).

¹³ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee, eds (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 273; See also Garland, who helps practically by delineating *how* believers can please the Lord: (1) speaking boldly the gospel (2 Cor 3:12), (2) taking with good courage the suffering that ensues (4:7-12), (3) living by faith, fully confidence of the resurrection (4:13-14, 17), (4) avoiding the taint of idolatry (6:14-7:1), and (5) bringing glory to God (4:15) by living out the message of Christ's reconciling death (5:19-21) (See David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, the New American Commentary. Ed, E. Ray Clendenen [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999], 267).

Petty rightly concludes: “Each of us must therefore develop a sense of priorities reflecting our gifts, our situation, and our callings, and our goals to glorify God ... this is where we seek to know and do the will of God.”¹⁴

Question #2: Do I Have Any Sinful Desires Involved?

Not only must the counselee diagnose his heart in desiring to please and glorify God, but he must also ask himself if he has any sinful desires involved. This is, perhaps, the most heart-probing question here – and the most deceiving (cf. Jer 17:9). Oftentimes Christians can *say* they are “honoring God” but yet the real, heart, fundamental motive behind the action is a lust for accolades and praise. Yet this heart attitude is deceitful, prideful and dishonoring to God. Remember Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10? These two sons of Aaron went to the Tabernacle to offer a sacrifice and instead of following the specific commands of Yahweh, they did things their own way. Perhaps they wanted to “prove” that their way was a viable option for sacrifice. But to their chagrin they found out the consequences of the sinful motivation and desire cost them their lives. The counselee must not let himself disregard God’s Laws so that he can do things his way.¹⁵

This is precisely what Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for. In Matt 23:1-7 are some verses where Jesus rebukes them and warns His followers *not* to be like these hypocrites because the

¹⁴ Petty, *Step by Step*, 92. In this same context he writes: “God’s guidance helps us discern the best and right among choices that qualify as lawful (i.e., not prohibited in Scripture). This requires setting priorities among absolutes. Let me explain. God commands us to evangelize, do missions, remember the poor, exhort and encourage one another, worship publicly and privately, visit the prisoner, show hospitality, love our spouses, bring up our children, and work at our vocation with all our heart. The question ... is not *whether* we do them, but *when*, and *in what order* ... We cannot do them all at once. We must choose when a particular positive act is a priority and when it is not (ibid.).

¹⁵ See Proverbs 4:23 “Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it *flow* the springs of life.”

real *heart motivation* of these Jewish leaders of the day was not to please God, but it was to receive the high esteem in the hearts and minds of the people. Consequently, it is here that Jesus gives a stern warning to his hearers that they should not live in the way the Pharisees lived.¹⁶ They looked good on the outside, but on the inside – with the evil motivations for self aggrandizement – they were dead, selfish and godless (Matt 23:23-29). The counselee must make certain the heart motive is not for self-gratification but rather for God’s glory.

Question #3: Do I Recognize that God is Absolutely Sovereign?

To begin, it is as James Petty describes it: “The Bible teaches that (1) God does have one specific plan for your life and (2) the events and choices of your life irresistibly and sovereignly work that plan in every detail ... it has all your mistakes, blindnesses, and sins accounted for in advance.”¹⁷ To recognize that God is sovereign means that He is in absolute control; that He is the King. It is as A. W. Pink defines sovereignty:

To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels, thwart His purposes, or resist His will (Ps 115:3). To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is ‘The Governor among the nations’ (Ps 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is the ‘Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords’ (1 Tim 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible.¹⁸

¹⁶ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 573; see 568-76 for a good summary of the events, hypocrisy and evil motives of the Pharisees; See also R. T. France’s great notes in *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee, eds (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 857-62.

¹⁷ Petty, *Step by Step*, 59.

¹⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God*. Rev ed (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 20-21.

This is similar to the doctrine of providence. The Westminster Confession of Faith defines providence as:

God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible fore-knowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.¹⁹

Psalm 93:1 begins by saying that the Lord reigns (cf. Psa 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; cp. 1 Tim 6:15)! Psalm 115:3 explicates this truth in reminding the readers that “God is in heaven and he does whatever He pleases.” Additionally, “The Lord has established His throne in the heavens and His *sovereignty rules over all* (Psa 103:19; emphasis added). These are just a few of the myriad of verses proving that God is in absolute control – from the most important circumstances to the most mundane.

Even James, the pastor of the early church in Jerusalem, wrote in chapter four of his epistle:

¹³ Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ Instead, *you ought* to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." ¹⁶ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil (4:13-15).

The counselee must recognize that God is in control. God is never passive. God is never “not working.” Rather, God is actively involved in the lives of all people. Proverbs 16:9 clearly states: “The mind of man plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.”²⁰

¹⁹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3rd ed. (Lawrenceville, Georg.: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1990), 17.

²⁰ Cf. Prov 16:10.

God's Sovereignty will keep a person from despair when the decisions may "lead into trouble." But it is imperative to remember God is always in control. It is as Dave Swavely terms it: God's "Sovereign guidance."²¹ Therefore, the counselee must be absolutely convinced in his heart that God is in control and, really, the counselee can *never* make a "wrong" decision – considering that God is still on the throne and is using it to advance His purposes.

Question #4: Will I Cause a Brother to Stumble?

A fourth question that the counselee can ask in searching his own heart in order to make wise decisions is: "Will what I am deciding to do cause another brother in Christ to stumble?" From a mundane to the important, the reality is the same, and that is to never cause a brother to stumble. In one of Jesus' first sermons, he declares that it would be better for a person to die harshly being drowned in the depths of the sea than to cause a brother to stumble (Matt 18:5-7).

Paul addresses this in his first letter to Corinth. He says that in his own conscience, he can eat meat, but if that were to *ever* cause a brother to stumble, "I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble" (1 Cor 8:13; cp. Rom 14:14-23).

The principle here is that of wisdom. It is necessary for the counselee to think about how the choice or decision at hand may contribute to or detract from the spiritual life of a brother or sister.²² Obviously, if the decision *could* cause a brother to stumble, it would be wisest to abstain from it for the sake of the brother and for the glory of the Lord.

²¹ Swavely, *Decisions, Decisions*, 109; cf. Psa 23.

²² *Ibid.*, 149-53 for a good discussion on this issue.

Question #5: Will I Have a Clean Conscience if I Do This?

The role of conscience in the life of the believer must not be underestimated.²³ This is helpful when coming to decision-making. The counselee must ask himself if he will have a clean conscience before the Lord if a certain decision is chosen. It is similar to Paul when he was accused by false teachers in Corinth that he was living a double life and defaming the name of God. He responded by saying: His confidence is “the testimony of our conscience” (2 Cor 1:12). This is how the church ought to act and live. A pure heart, a sincere faith, *and a good conscience* must be present in the life and ministry of a Christian (cf 1 Tim 1:5).

Therefore, the counselee ought to search his own heart and make certain that his conscience will not strike him and that he will not feel “guilty” because of the choice made. This involves being saturated with God’s Word through and through and making a decision which does not violate any of God’s clear commands in Scripture. If after careful study and prayer, the counselee decides to make decision one way or another, he must make certain that his conscience will be clear of all guilt (cf. 1 Pet 3:16).

Question #6: How Can I Honor God *While* I Perform This Action?

Finally, the last question the counselee can ask himself when an important decision needs to be made is the simple inquiry: “Can I honor God *as I’m performing this action*? In other words, if the decision will lead the counselee down a path which may lead to sin – or, to temptation – it may be wisest to refuse that option.

²³ This obviously needs to be elaborated in the counseling session. The counselee needs to understand that God’s Word informs the conscience and sets the standard of what is right and wrong. Remember: God’s Word sets the standard for conscience, *not* experience, opinions, majority-opinion, etc. This is why saturation with God’s Word is absolutely crucial for the Christian life.

A pertinent (and sometimes, an all too familiar) text is Colossians 3:16-17 and 23:

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father ... Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.

The reality here is that the Word of God will find its home in the heart and mind of the believer who genuinely desires to study, pour into and live by God's Word (Ps 119:130). The goal is that the Word of God is to find its abode²⁴ in the soul of the believer and, consequently, he will live his life – even to the most mundane of activities – to the glory of God!

As Wiersbe practically helps:

By our words and our works, we should glorify His name. If we permit anything into our lives that cannot be associated with the name of Jesus, then we are sinning. We must do and say everything on the authority of His name and for the honor of His name.²⁵

Practically speaking, a couple in the NT who are always noted together are Priscilla and Aquila, and they did their work for the glory of God (Acts 18:2, 18, 26, Rom 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19). Acts 18:2-3 says that they were “tentmakers” and, yet, they were so involved in the church. They, no doubt, were glorifying God *as they were* vocationally working as tentmakers. This is what the counselee must learn to do. While doing everything – from significant to insignificant, from important to menial – it must be remembered that the Christian is to glorify God *as he lives* life.

Everything that is done in life ought to be working towards the truth of obeying Jesus' command: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added

²⁴ From the phrase: Ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικεῖτω ἐν ὑμῖν πλουσίως.

²⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Complete: Colossians* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1981), 121.

to you” (Matt 6:33). To seek the kingdom of God is to put on a new lifestyle which is to put on Christ. “That is the obligation of every believer ... the goal of the Christian life is Christlikeness. And this cannot be done apart from living the Christian life so that *God* is the One who receives all the honor and glory.”²⁶

Conclusion²⁷

The ultimate goal in the Christian life is to glorify God and to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 8:29; Eph 5:1; Rom 12:1-2).²⁸ This paper has endeavored to give six practical questions in order to help the counselee (and, of course, the counselor also) to search his own heart and soul so as to make the wisest and God-honoring decisions in life.

Perhaps it is appropriate to conclude with a warning, for *biblical* decision-making seems to be a lost art in contemporary evangelicalism. MacArthur concludes with sober words for counselors and counselees to heed when decisions in life need to be made:

The church has become lazy. It has moved away from careful biblical thinking and has tolerated far too much shoddy teaching. Fewer and fewer Christians are approaching life with the Berean perspective. They haven’t developed the habit of discerning or applying biblical principles to their daily situations. Consequently, when they get into problems, they assume Scripture can’t help them. Then they turn to humanistic or worldly

²⁶ See John MacArthur, *Colossians and Philemon*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 160.

²⁷ It is appropriate to quote MacArthur who gives some practical advice: “God’s will is that you be saved, Spirit-filled, sanctified, submissive, and suffering. God’s Word makes all this clear ... If you are doing all five of the basic things, do you know what the next principle of God’s will is? *Do whatever you want!* If those five elements of God’s will are operating in your life, who is running your wants? *God is!* The psalmist said, “Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart (Ps 37:4). God does not say He will fulfill all the desires that are there. He says He will put the desires there. If you are living a godly life, He will give you the right desires” (See John MacArthur, *Found: God’s Will* [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1977], 57-58).

²⁸ See also Eyrich and Strickland, “Counseling the Decision Makers,” 31.

alternatives that only compound their grief. They witlessly renounce their sufficiency in Christ and then struggle to fill the void with utterly inadequate substitutes.²⁹

May this not be true of biblical counselors or counselees! May the Word of God have such a place of centrality in every decision that is made so that God may receive all the honor and glory due His name!

²⁹ John MacArthur, Jr. *Our Sufficiency in Christ* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), 130. Furthermore, Petty concludes with an encouraging word: “Those who are in Christ know that despite all the decisions we face, the mistakes we make, the sins we repent of, and the things we did not anticipate, God works in all things for the good of transforming us into the image of Christ, the Son of God (Rom 8:28). Through His providence toward his children, God our Great Shepherd leads us by His mighty staff toward eternal life. If that is your goal in life, you are in very good hands” (“Guidance and the Plan of God,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 3 [Spring 1999]: 44).

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