

No secret plan: Why you don't have to 'find' God's will for your life

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A large strand of contemporary evangelical theology—what I call the "new evangelical theology"—emphasizes the need to "find God's will for your life." This challenge turns out to be a terrific source of anxiety for the students I encounter. They're young, which means they have a lot of life ahead of them and a lot of big decisions to make. When they hear about the importance of "finding God's will for your life," they conclude that it's not enough to learn how to make good decisions about what career to pursue or whom to marry. On top of all that, you have to figure out whether this is exactly the decision God has in mind for you. And how do you figure that out?

The will of God is an important biblical concept, but it turns out that what my evangelical students are trying to find is something different. The commandments

and promises of God, in which he tells us what he wants us to do and believe, are easy to find: they're right there in the Bible. But that's not what my students are looking for. They have something else in mind when they refer to "God's will," though it's not easy to say what. And it's certainly not easy to find. Given all the effort it takes to find it, it must be awfully easy to miss.

And that's where the anxieties come in. The way my students talk about it, God's will is out there waiting to be found, like the one person they're convinced God has picked for them to marry. But how do you know where to look? And how do you know when you've found it? (The "how do you know?" questions, with their accompanying anxieties, are a sign that something's gone wrong.) What happens if you mistake the will of God and don't marry "the one" that God has chosen for you? (Do you wonder why evangelical Christians have as high a divorce rate as everyone else?) Or what happens if you only get God's "second best" will for your life? (Do you wonder why "disappointment with God" is so common among evangelicals?) A whole boatload of anxieties is tied up with this notion of "finding God's will."

The good news is that the will of God is not really like that. It's not the kind of thing you have to look for and find, and therefore it's not the kind of thing you can miss. What you can do is disobey God's will. That's easy to do—it's called sin. But in another, quite different sense you can never miss God's will, no matter how badly you sin or disobey God. For in addition to God's will revealed in his word, there's also his hidden will, as it's called, which means his providence governing the universe and all of history. His word we can disobey, but his providence is sovereign over heaven and earth, and we cannot overcome it or even escape it. It's not something we are capable of disobeying, much less missing.

So the will of God that my students are trying to find is some third thing: not God's revealed will (because it's something they have to "find") and not his providential will (because it's something they might "miss"). It's an extra kind of will of God that is not found in the Bible. That is to say, it doesn't really exist. And that's good news. It means—if they only knew it—that they are allowed to make their own decisions like responsible moral agents, like adults seeking to grow in wisdom and understanding or stewards learning how to invest their talents. They don't have to find what God has hidden.

If you want to know God's will for your life, here it is: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love

kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8). The will of God for your life is justice, kindness and a humble walk with him. Nothing more is required of you. Of course, what this verse has to teach us takes a lifetime to learn, but it will make a good lifetime, one that honors God.

There are other biblical passages with the same basic message. Most important of all is the teaching of our Lord Jesus, which he derives directly from scripture. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39, based on Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18).

Again, if you obey these commandments, which are the heart of the law of God, then you are doing all that is required of you. Anyone who tells you that you need to do more in order to be "in the will of God" is teaching you falsehood. Be free of such falsehood. Obey the law of God instead and you have enough to do for a lifetime.

In this way, as the great Reformer Martin Luther taught in his *Treatise on Good Works*, the law of God reinforces the gospel of Christ. It frees us from doctrines cooked up by human beings and from self-chosen works by which we try to prove how spiritual we are—all the techniques that are supposed to make us more spiritual but that mainly make us more anxious, as we keep trying to figure out whether we've done a good-enough job. Instead, after the gospel of Christ sweeps away all such anxieties, the law of God gives us all sorts of good work to do. This is the good work that God has prepared for us to carry out (Eph. 2:10), yet it is work that truly becomes our own as we increasingly learn to walk in love, kindness and justice.

Yes, God has told us what is good. And he does tell us a lot, not adding to our burden but filling in the details about what justice, kindness and love amount to in practice. So to grow in the knowledge of God's will we have the whole of God's word to study and learn from, not only the law of Moses but also the words of the prophets, the writings of the apostles and the teachings of our Lord Jesus himself. These are words to strengthen the soul, for they give us the will of God to live by instead of subjecting us to human fantasies and make-believe. In this respect the law of God is very good news indeed.

The best place to start, once we have learned Jesus' two great commandments, is the Ten Commandments in the law of Moses. Luther recited them every morning in

his prayers to remind himself why he didn't have to believe the decrees of the pope or the rules of the monks, with their supposedly superior spirituality. Christians in our day could scarcely do better than to follow his lead, contemplating the Ten Commandments daily so as to know why they don't have to play the anxious games that the new evangelical theology seeks to pressure them into playing. That would certainly be much better than what actually happens now, when many young people who couldn't recite the Ten Commandments if their life depended on it get up in the morning and "listen" for God to tell them what to do that day. For them, the revealed will of God has been replaced by the thoughts of their own hearts.

Again, it is not exactly their fault: this is what they think they're supposed to do to be good Christians. It's like the host of medieval superstitions that Luther confronted: people got tangled up in them because that's all they knew. They were anxious about getting everything right, and they were never really sure they had, but they didn't have anything better. The preaching of the gospel of Christ gave them something better to trust, and the teaching of the law of God gave them something better to obey.

Obedying God's commandments is enough to do. But this directive doesn't tell us exactly what to do in every situation. That's how the notion of "finding God's will for your life" gets its foothold. We have specific decisions to make about things like career or marriage, and the law of God doesn't tell us to choose this job over that one or this potential spouse over that one. So how do we know what to do?

Once again, the "how do you know?" question is a sign that something's wrong. If you're looking for a formula or method for making decisions, then you're looking for the wrong thing. There is no recipe. There is only wisdom, the heart's intelligent skill at discerning good decisions from bad ones. This skill is not a method—not a formula you can apply to particular situations simply by following the rules, but a habit of the heart you have to develop through long experience of your own, which includes making mistakes from time to time. The concept of wisdom is what every method for finding God's will leaves out of the decision-making process. It's left out precisely because the project of finding God's will is an attempt to guarantee that you won't make a mistake. All such guarantees are falsehoods, attempts to short-circuit the hard work of acquiring wisdom.

Think of the work of a steward, beginning the day after his master leaves town. He has been given a commandment to do business (see Luke 19:13), which means that

his master expects him to make good investments with his talents. What he hasn't been given are instructions about which investments to make. Those decisions are up to him.

Conceivably he could learn to make good investments by following a formula or detailed instructions from his master. But learning to make good investments really means acquiring the kind of skill or virtue that the Bible calls wisdom, which is centered on the ability to discern between what is good and what is bad. In this case, it's the ability to discern between good and bad investments. To develop this ability, there's no substitute for practice—making many decisions and learning from experience which kinds of investments are profitable for his master's kingdom and which are not.

So there's a major reason why the new evangelical practice of finding God's will is not in the Bible. It would defeat the purpose of stewardship, which is to learn in our own hearts how to carry out God's work in the world. For this we need to acquire the virtues and wisdom needed to do God's work well, so that his work becomes ours and we become co-workers with God, as Paul says (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1). We can't learn this if we don't make our own decisions—which includes making our own mistakes and learning from them. "Finding God's will" is an attempt to short-circuit this learning process by taking our own decisions out of the loop. That's why God disapproves of it; the steward who tries to avoid making his own decisions is the one he condemns as disobedient—the one who buries his talent.

To make a good decision, you need to start with a good question—a question about what is good: Is this a good way to invest my talents? Is this a good person to marry? Can we be good parents together? and so on. But in answering such questions there is no formula and no substitute for wisdom. Which is why when young people have to make a big decision—say, about marriage—it is utterly appropriate that they learn from the wisdom of those who have had to make such decisions before. They need help from outside themselves. Above all, they need help from God, which is why they should pray. What they need to pray for is help in discerning between good and bad ways to invest their talents and their lives. But that's simply another way of saying they must pray for wisdom.

Pertinent here is the famous prayer of Solomon, the son of David, when he becomes king after his father's death. As king, he is the steward of Israel's true King enthroned in heaven, the Lord God himself. But he's just a young man—"only a little

child," he says—and he's worried that he's not up to the job (2 Kings 3:7). But when the Lord appears to him in a dream, Solomon does not ask God to tell him what to do. He does not ask about God's will for his life. He already knows that: God has made him king, so God's will is for him to be a good king and govern well. He doesn't need God to tell him that. What he needs is wisdom.

Solomon's description of what he's asking for shows us what we should be asking for too whenever we face difficult responsibilities: "Give your servant therefore an understanding heart," he prays, "to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil" (1 Kings 3:9). Wisdom means discerning between good and bad, like a king discerning between good and bad decisions in governing his people, or like a steward discerning between a good and a bad investment of his talents.

What Solomon realizes, and the new evangelical theology does not, is that the crucial terms to use when making decisions are "good" and "bad" (see also Heb. 5:14). This includes moral good and evil, for which our guide is God's revealed will and his commandments. But it includes many other things as well, for there are many ways of making bad decisions that are not immoral, as, for example, in making a bad investment. It is not a sin to make a bad investment—unless, of course, you're motivated by greed or some other immoral purpose. But if you're a steward who's still learning how to make good investments, you're bound to make a few mistakes, and that's not a morally evil thing to do.

So everything points toward the Lord's wanting us to make our own decisions and even our own mistakes, rather than ask him what to do. Learning from Solomon, we need to see that when we're faced with tough decisions, what we need to pray for is not how to discern the Lord's will for our lives, but how to discern good from bad. For we already know the Lord's will for our lives: he wants us to learn how to discern good from bad, including how to make good investments for his kingdom.

This is a crucial point that the new evangelical theology gets wrong. We shouldn't be praying to discern the Lord's will in our situation; we should be praying to learn how to discern good from bad. That's the kind of prayer that makes us co-workers with the Spirit of Christ, who is working in us, reshaping our hearts so that they will be hearts of wisdom. To ask what the Lord's will is distracts us from the task our Lord has given us, which is to learn how to make good decisions. Learning this takes time and effort, and the Lord does not short-circuit the learning process by making our decisions for us.

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