

THE WAYS GOD GUIDES

by Ray C. Stedman

We are seeing so much of practical help in some of the problems of Christian life as we follow the pattern set by the apostles and the early Christians in the book of Acts. I hope you are realizing, more and more as we go through this book, that here is a description of normal Christianity. This is the way the church could have been, and should have been, in any age. Unless the church is living in the atmosphere of the book of Acts, it is missing out on its heritage.

This morning we shall take up another marvelously helpful passage. Beginning with Verse 22 of Chapter 15 we will find great help with a common problem in the Christian life. This often appears to be the most baffling and difficult problem with which young Christians wrestle. It is the question, "How can I know the will of God for me? How will God guide me so that I can know, and do, what he wants?"

Almost every young Christian thinks the important thing is to find out what God wants him to do, and where he wants him to do it. The issue always seems to revolve around "What" and "Where." At that time of our Christian life, our hearts have been captured by the grace and love of the Lord Jesus. Our wills are subject to him, and we want to serve God, but we do not know what he wants us to do. This seems to be such a difficult problem, and so many wrestle with it in their early Christian life.

But the important thing to God is not what to do, nor where to do it. That may be important to you, but it is not important to God. The important thing to him is *how you do it*. With what resources do you do his will? Upon what do you depend while you are acting and working? That is where the will of God is really involved. That is what he is interested in. The rest is really very simple.

For the encouragement of young Christians I would say that it is not at all difficult for God to direct you into what he wants you to do, and where he wants you to do it. God himself will do that. You can hardly avoid it -- if you have learned how to do what God wants, if you have learned to depend upon him in any activity.

There are many ways in which God will indicate to us his mind about what he wants done. Seven of them appear in the section we are going to look at now. This is very practical, so please follow carefully in your own Bibles as we study together.

The first way appears in the paragraph describing the conclusion of the great council at Jerusalem where the early church settled the question of whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to become Christians. We read,

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, with the following letter: "The brethren, both the apostles and the elders, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greeting. Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, it has seemed good to us in assembly to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity [or fornication]. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." {Acts 15:22-29 RSV}

This is the way the council conveyed to the outlying churches the decision reached by the apostles and the

elders.

There is a very important principle of God's guidance embodied here. It is vital to see that this early church settled a question of doctrine by first hearing everybody's viewpoint. There was much debate, Luke says. Everyone had a chance to say what he thought the Scriptures taught. Finally James summed up all that had been said.

He underlined two particular points:

First, he took note of the activity of God. He said that it was very evident that God had already answered the question for them by saving Gentiles, without asking anyone's permission. He did so without reference to any ritual or law of any kind. As Peter said, "He gave them the Holy Spirit just as he did us."

But furthermore, and this is very important, James pointed out that he could accept this as the genuine activity of God, and not the activity of a demon or some other devilish power, because it agreed with the Word of God. Amos the prophet said this would happen.

So, as he put together the actions of God and the Word of God, the council came to the unanimous conclusion that this was indeed the mind of the Spirit. They realized that God was in their midst and that he could make his mind known to them. They understood that when they reached unanimity of opinion they had found the mind of the Spirit. So the first principle of guidance from God, especially in doctrinal matters, is that unanimous agreement marks the mind of the Spirit.

Notice also that they conveyed this decision to the people in Antioch not only by letter but also by appointing some men to go down and explain it to them. I write that kind of letter, too. They have to be explained once people receive them. But this letter was perfectly clear. Yet God is underscoring here a very important lesson. People learn best by having truth presented in a two-fold way:

- Through the eye gate, and
- Through the ear gate.

These men were sent to expound the letter that was written, and to make it perfectly clear. Some people learn better through reading, some through hearing.

Here we read of the beginning of a process for teaching in the church which is still God's method today. This is exactly what he has done with us. He has written us a letter, the Bible, and put his truth in writing. He has also appointed men to come and explain it, teachers, gifted men who are able to expound the Scriptures. It is not only men who have been to seminaries, by any means, but it is many of you who have gifts of exhorting and teaching and preaching.

So these men came to Antioch with this dual conveyance of the truth -- the letter, and their explaining of the Scriptures -- because they had discovered the mind of the Spirit through the principle of unanimous agreement in doctrine.

The second principle is set forth in the following paragraph:

So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. And when they had read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brethren to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. {Acts 15:30-35 RSV}

What a sigh of relief went up from these Gentile Christians when the letter arrived! They would not have to be subject to any Jewish ritual. They had understood this already from the teaching of Paul, but now it was very

apparent that the whole church was in agreement. How delighted they were then at the exhortation.

But now, notice how this paragraph focuses upon the activity of believers when there is no special guidance from the Holy Spirit to do something new or unusual. Judas and Silas came down with Paul and Barnabas and they spent their time "exhorting the brethren with many words and strengthening them." This is what you do between the occasions of extraordinary activity in the Spirit-filled life. You give yourself to the most fundamental and basic activity of Christianity, the knowledge and understanding of the Word of God, the learning of the word. That is always in order, always in season. So is the teaching and preaching of the word, as you see in the last sentence: "But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord ..." But do not miss the last four words: "with many others also." In that congregation there were many, beside the four men mentioned here, who had gifts of teaching and preaching. They exercised them there in Antioch and in all the area around.

In our congregation there are many of you who have the gift of teaching and the gift of preaching (proclaiming the truth, telling it abroad and appealing to the will -- as opposed to teaching, which instructs the mind). And you should be exercising these gifts here, just as they did in Antioch, because this is the secret of the multiplication of the church. As they did this in Antioch the word was spreading all through the surrounding region.

A couple of years ago I had the privilege of being in a party which visited the ruins of Baalbek, located between the Lebanon ranges, between Beirut and Damascus. In the valley between those high mountain ranges a strong civilization had developed in these early centuries. At the foot of the valley, on the Orontes River, is Antioch, the very city we are reading about today. All through that valley in the first century Christian communities sprang up.

I walked around the ruins of Baalbek and noted how vast and extensive this complex is. It is one of the largest in the world, with a temple to Jupiter, a temple to Bacchus, the god of wine, one to Venus, goddess of sex, and a number of temples to other gods, covering a huge area. I asked the guide when these temples were at their height and was most interested at his reply. He said, "These temples were built by the Romans in the first century A. D., to counteract the spread of Christianity through this area."

The Romans went to great expense and effort to build these huge pagan temples. They went down to Egypt and quarried the stones for the columns, painfully moved them across the desert sands on rollers, floated them down the Nile river, shipped these huge pillars across the Mediterranean, dragged them up the valley or over the mountain ranges -- a tremendous, Herculean task.

They did it in desperation to stop the spread of Christianity throughout that whole region. And who was spreading it? The people, as they exercised their gifts and were obedient to the second principle of the Spirit's guidance: When you do not know what else to do, persist in learning and teaching the Word of God. That is fundamental to all else.

Now look at a third principle:

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." {Acts 15:36 RSV}

There is no vision, no angelic call. There is no lightning, no special word of the Spirit in the inner heart. There is simply the responsible concern of Paul and Barnabas for the people whom they had led to Christ. They remembered all those Gentiles who had come to Christ in the cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and they said to one another, "We have a responsibility to help them grow in grace. They do not yet know the whole counsel of God; there are truths that they must understand, without which they will be lacking in their Christian experience. Let us go and see how they are, and impart these truths to them."

That is a perfectly proper leading of the Holy Spirit. God does not want to give orders to you about everything you do. He is not interested in robots. He does not want automatons who must wait for some special feeling

before they act. Once you discover the power by which to act -- the life of Jesus within, ready to respond to the choice of your will -- then the initiative lies with you. You can do what lies on your heart to do. Do what you want to do, and the Spirit of God will be with you in it. This is what we see here, and Paul teaches it in Philippians 2:13 where he says, "Work out your own solutions with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you, both to will [to choose] and to do of his good pleasure," {cf, Phil 2:12b-13}. So do not wait, move out! Don't wait for some particular invitation to come. If you sense an opportunity to show responsible concern for another, move into it, and God will be with you in it.

There is a fourth principle in the next paragraph:

And Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. {Act 15:37-41 RSV}

Here is a quarrel between Barnabas and Paul which has fascinated many. They could not agree whether or not to take young John Mark with them again. Barnabas was his cousin and wanted to give the young man another chance. But Paul did not want to take the chance because the work was both important and dangerous, and he did not think it wise to take someone they could not count on.

So we read the sad note that "there arose a sharp contention" between them. Many have said, "Which of these men was right?" There have been a lot of disagreements over that, so that many people have had "sharp contention" between them over whether Paul or Barnabas was right. But that is really not the point.

I believe both of these men were right. One was looking at the work and the other at the person. As Paul looked at the work he was perfectly right to say, "We don't want somebody who is apt to cop out on us." That is exactly what he said. And he probably quoted the words of Jesus, "If any man puts his hand to the plow and turns back, he is not worthy of the kingdom of God," {cf, Luke 9:62}. That is right. Christian service and ministry are demanding, and those who undertake them should be prepared to go through with it and stick with it to the end, for God's cause is injured by those who quit in the middle.

On the other hand, Barnabas, though I am sure he would have agreed as to the importance of the work, was looking at the young man. He knew Mark was gifted. Sure, he had failed; but who doesn't? Who of us does not need a second chance, does not need to have a forgiving spirit exercised toward us, and the opportunity to try again? So Barnabas was willing to give Mark a second chance.

This indicates a very normal and proper procedure by which we may know the mind of the Spirit. There are times when there are differences of viewpoint which require a separation. The will of God was that Barnabas should take Mark and go to Cyprus, because Cyprus, his birthplace, had not been visited since the churches there had been founded. And it was the will of God for Paul to take Silas and go into Syria and Cilicia, because the churches there needed his particular ministry. But it was not the will of God that they should be sharp in their contention. Their quarreling was not right. It was the will of God to separate; it was not the will of God to quarrel. There are times when the Spirit of God does lead Christians to go separate ways. But they should do so with joy and with an agreeable understanding that the mind of the Spirit has been expressed in their divergent viewpoints.

Still another principle, the fifth, is in chapter sixteen. Ignore the chapter division here and move right on. We read,

And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions which had been reached by the apostles

and elders who were at Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. {16:1-5 RSV}

Paul is back at Lystra, the city where he had been stoned, where he had encountered the most severe opposition of his first missionary journey. There he had led a young man to Christ on that first occasion, who now was still a boy, only about sixteen years old. Paul thought he observed in him various gifts -- gifts of ministry, perhaps of wisdom and of knowledge in the Scriptures, of teaching, of preaching. He wanted to take Timothy with him, using that marvelous means of discipling which has never been superseded, the process and method by which Jesus himself trained men, taking him along with them and teaching him as they ministered together. So he took him as an intern on the rest of his journey.

But there was a bit of a problem. Timothy was half Jewish, half Greek. His father was a Greek but his mother was a Jew, and, according to the Jews, this made him a Jew. The Jewish people had a very practical way of thinking about this. They said anyone knows who a man's mother is, but you can't be as sure of his father. So they reckoned the line of descent through the mother and Timothy was therefore considered a Jew.

The amazing thing is that Paul circumcised Timothy, while earlier he had refused to do the same to Titus. This is not recorded in Acts, but from a parallel passage in Galatians we have learned that he had taken Titus, who was a Greek, with him up to Jerusalem. The Jewish brethren there wanted to circumcise Titus, but Paul absolutely refused. He was adamant because to have permitted it would have been a concession to the idea that you had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian.

So here is another marvelous indication of how to know the mind and will of God. In any situation involving customs and rituals, cultural matters, the governing rule is to find the great underlying principle at stake, and to act accordingly. In the case of Titus, it would have been devastating to have circumcised him. It would have meant yielding to the whole concept of legalism, and baptizing it as a Christian teaching to have allowed this young man, wholly a Greek, a Gentile, to be circumcised. But the case of Timothy is different. Timothy is looked upon as a Jew, and in order not to offend the Jews among whom he must labor, in order to open the door of acceptance by them, Paul submits to this Old Testament ritual and circumcises Timothy. Because here the governing principle is, "I became all things to all men, in order that I might win some," {cf, 1 Cor 9:22}. This approach may result in two seemingly contradictory actions, but all is reconciled as you see the great principle underneath.

We have two more principles in the next paragraph:

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. {Acts 16:6-8 RSV}

What a remarkably helpful illustration this is! It links with what we said earlier -- that the initiative lies with the Christian. Paul did not wait for directions from God as to where he was to go; he went to the most logical place. He went to where it appeared there was an open door. He took the next step in the path ahead. But the Holy Spirit did not want him to go there, and so he shut the door.

I fully believe that these words indicate that Paul was experiencing what we call the "inner witness of the Spirit." The Spirit of God is willing to confirm to us, or deny to us, whether or not we have made a correct decision -- but only after we make the decision. That is important to note.

Isaiah said, "You will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk you in it,'" {cf, Isa 30:21}. Behind you, after you have made the decision, after you have started out, then there will be a voice which says, "Yes, this is right." That voice is usually a sense of peace, a great inner sense of the confirming peace of the Holy Spirit which, after you have committed yourself, tells you it is right.

But suppose the decision is not correct. Well then, it was not wrong to try. Paul is not rebuked here because he tried to go into Asia or Bithynia. That was perfectly all right. The Spirit simply said, "No, Paul, the time is not

yet." Later Paul did go into Asia; that is where Ephesus is located. But the Spirit's timing is not yet. And so, not waiting for any particular directions but moving out, he is guided of the Spirit by the closing of doors, or by the inner sense of denial from the Spirit, and thus he is led at last to the city of Troas.

This is the ancient city of Troy, whose people fought the Trojan wars against the Greeks. Now look what happens to Paul in this ancient city:

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. {Acts 16:9-10 RSV}

God is sovereign, and he can choose the way he wants to direct you. Sometimes he will come through in such an unmistakable way that you cannot help but know that God has spoken.

Something like that occurred when I first came here as pastor of Peninsula Bible Church. My name was suggested to the men here by three different sources, none of whom knew that the others were writing. Each wrote independently, and yet their letters all arrived in the same week. The men here were not considering any other man at the time. When they went to the mail box they found three letters suggesting that they get in touch with a young man named Ray Stedman. That was a clear-cut moving of the Spirit of God, and they took it as such.

So here is a vision from God. Notice that it is not a dream. The difference between a dream and a vision is that a dream always has us in it -- which may make it a nightmare! Psychologists tell us that dreams always involve ourselves. If you dreamed last night of a long-eared mule, or a witch on a broomstick, or whatever, that was you. You were in the center of the dream. But this is a vision; it is subjective. It is not Paul, it is another man, a Macedonian, calling out to him, "Come over and help us." Paul knew it to be a vision. "And [I love this] immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them." They make an immediate response.

Do you see the quiet acting of faith here? Paul expects God to lead him. He does not doubt it. He simply acts on the matters before him and expects God to correct him if he is wrong. He is already moving out, but he determines his exact destination on the basis of the vision that he had seen.

And notice something else that is interesting here. This is where Luke joins the party. You may have missed it in the first reading, but, in Verse 8, Luke says, "they went down to Troas." But when you come to Verse 10, it is "And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach ..." By that change in pronouns, from "they" to "we," Luke indicates that he has now joined the expedition. We do not know where he came from, or how he got there, or what contact he had with Paul. Perhaps in one of these Greek cities along the way he had met the apostle. Now he joins him, and is united with Paul as they reach out toward Europe.

In our next study together we will be looking at the way the gospel came into Europe and thus changed all of Western civilization, vastly affecting our lives today.

There are some of the ways God guides. Let me review them for you:

- In the understanding of doctrine, he guides by unanimous agreement.
- In those quiet periods of life, when there is no particular sense of direction from any source, he expects us to manifest persistent obedience in learning, teaching, and exhorting in the Word.
- In relations with other persons, he expects us to show a responsible concern. That will often initiate action.
- In irreconcilable practical differences of opinion, he expects cordial separation, so that there is unity of

spirit even though there is no longer union of endeavor.

- In customs, rituals, and cultural matters, he expects us to examine the important principle that is at stake and to act according to that.
- In matters of geographical direction, we saw two ways that he guides:
 - Either by denying to us, or confirming to us by a sense of peace, the most obvious and legitimate action to take;
 - Or by a direct and obvious interposition of his mind and will, made known through a vision or a call that is unmistakably from God.

Who knows how God is going to guide you?

That is not so important. You can understand some of the possibilities from our study here. But the important thing is that, above all, you reckon that, whatever action you take -- wherever you go or whatever you do -- you do it on the basis of dependence upon his power in you, his life in you. "Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all to the glory of the Lord," {cf, Col 3:17}.

The only thing that glorifies God, is God at work. Only God can do God's work. God alone can glorify himself.

Prayer:

Please teach us, Heavenly Father, how to apply this practical help that the Scriptures so freely give us in our daily life. May it be true of every one of us that we are available instruments, ready to be used according to your mind and purpose, right where we are -- not waiting for anything dramatic but ready to move out -- knowing that you will lead us and work through us, as you have promised to do. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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