

REVIEW ARTICLE

Decision Making and the Will of God

CHARLES R. SMITH

Decision Making and the Will of God, by Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson. A Critical Concern Book. Portland: Multnomah Press, 1981. Pp. 452. \$10.95.

As a seminary Director of Admissions I have had the opportunity of listening to scores of young men explain how they have discovered God's will for their lives, or discuss their difficulties in doing so. Accordingly, both due to natural interest and to occupational necessity, I have attempted to stay abreast of any worthwhile literature relating to decision making by Christians. When this book was presented to me this past spring I skimmed it in about one hour and immediately dashed off a note to the author saying, "I wish I had written that!" This book should be in every pastor's office and in every church library. It presents a sane and biblical approach to decision making. In harmony with the message of the book, Dr. Haddon Robinson remarks that "when we ask, 'How can I know the will of God?' we may be raising a pagan question." He then adds that "a better question to pursue is, 'How do I make good decisions?'" (Foreword, p. 13). That is the essence of the book.

The book is well organized and outlined in detail. Part One consists of a typical presentation of the "traditional view." Part Two critiques the traditional view and Part Three presents "the way of wisdom." Part Four is an application of the "wisdom view" to the various decision making processes of life. In my opinion, the most important part of the book is its critique of the traditional view (Part Two). This adequately warns against many of the common errors in interpreting God's Word and in "waiting" for divine guidance. Both Part Two and Part Three are worthy of extensive quotation in this review in order to convey the major ideas involved.

In responding to the common view that God has a detailed plan for each Christian's life, a plan which must be diligently sought by each believer, Friesen responds as follows:

But is that really the case? Does the wise father guide his child by formulating a plan that covers every detail of the child's life and then revealing that plan step-by-step as each decision must be made? Of course not. The father

who is truly wise teaches his child the basic principles of life. He teaches what is right and wrong, what is wise over against what is foolish. He then seeks to train the child to make his own decisions making proper use of those correct guidelines. Such a father is overjoyed when he knows that the child has matured to the point where he is able to function independently as an adult, making wise decisions on the basis of principles learned in his youth. The grown-up son or daughter is thereby prepared to live in the real world and make responsible choices with respect to mate, vocation, and the other decisions of life (p. 85).

To the question, "Does God have a plan for my life?", he responds, "If God's plan is thought of as a blueprint or 'dot' in the 'center of God's will' *that must be discovered by the decision maker*, the answer is no. On the other hand, we affirm that God does have a plan for our lives—a plan that is described in the Bible in terms that we can fully understand and apply" (p. 113, emphasis added, to be noted later).

He asserts that the traditional view "promotes immature decisions":

1. By permitting believers to justify unwise decisions on grounds that "God told me to do it."
2. By fostering costly delays because of uncertainty about God's individual will.
3. By influencing people to reject personal preferences when faced with apparently equal options.
4. By encouraging the practice of "putting out a fleece"—letting circumstances dictate the decision (p. 126).

The following difficulties in applying the traditional view are cited:

1. Ordinary Decision: The decision-making process must be abandoned in the "minor" decisions of life.
2. Equal Options: Insistence upon only one "correct" choice generates anxiety over "missing the dot" rather than gratitude for more than one fine opportunity.
3. Immaturity: In some instances, the logic of the traditional view tends to promote immature approaches to decision making.
4. Subjectivity: Certainty that one has found God's individual will is impossible apart from an objective source of knowledge (p. 137).

This approach does not deny the Holy Spirit's involvement in individual guidance. "Scripture also teaches that the Holy Spirit is actively, personally involved in the lives of believers, leading them in the fulfillment of his moral will. The Bible does not, however, teach that the Holy Spirit is providing direct guidance for believers in nonmoral decisions through some sort of inaudible, inner 'voice.' It is a fallacy to superimpose Paul's 'Macedonian Call' onto his comments regarding 'being led by the Spirit'" (p. 139).

Since so many Christians make the "peace of Christ" the ultimate "umpire" in determining whether or not a decision is within the will of God, Friesen quotes Abbott as stating that "the immediate reference here [Col. 3:15] is not to inward peace of the soul; but the peace with one another, as the context shows" (p. 112). In other words, "peace may be defined negatively as the absence of anxiety within a person (as in Philippians 4:6-7), or as the absence of hostility between persons. In Colossians 3:15, it is clearly the latter" (p. 142).

Friesen correctly insists that we should not be placing our emphasis on searching for God's specific leading with regard to personal decisions but that

the emphasis of Scripture is on God's moral will. In fact, the Bible reveals nothing of an "individual will" governing each decision. Rather, the teaching of Scripture may be summarized by these basic principles:

1. In those areas specifically addressed by the Bible, the revealed commands of God (His moral will) are to be obeyed.

2. In those areas where the Bible gives no command or principle (nonmoral decisions), the believer is free and responsible to choose his own course of action. Any decision made within the moral will of God is acceptable to God.

3. In nonmoral decisions, the objective of the Christian is to make wise decisions on the basis of spiritual expediency.

4. In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the outworking of God's sovereign will as it touches each decision (pp. 151-52).

It is correctly noted (pp. 165-79) that the NT often refers to a believer doing what he *wishes* to do or as he *purposes* to do (see 1 Cor 10:27, 2 Cor 9:7).

The relationship of God's sovereign will to decision making is summarized as follows:

1. God's sovereignty does not exclude the need for planning; it does require humble submission to His will.

2. Circumstances define the context of the decision and must be weighed by wisdom . . . not "read" as road signs to God's individual will.

3. Open doors are God-given opportunities for service . . . not specific guidance from God requiring one to enter.

4. "Putting out a fleece" is an invalid practice that sometimes works when it is really wisdom in disguise (p. 225).

This matter of the relationship of God's sovereign will to decision making raises the only significant theological problem presented by the book. Friesen insists that God's sovereign will is *exhaustive*. It includes all things—even such matters as "the numbers that come up when dice are thrown" (Prov 16:33, p. 203). But if God's sovereign will is *exhaustive*, how can it be asserted that "the idea of an *individual will* of God for every detail of a person's life is *not* found in Scripture" (pp. 82-83)? Perhaps it would be better merely to insist, as Friesen later does, that

Since God's sovereign plan cannot be ascertained in advance, it has no direct bearing on the actual consideration of options or formulation of plans. God's sovereign will governs circumstances and provides open doors, but His moral will and wisdom are the determinative factors in the making of the decision itself (p. 225).

Within this scope one could assert that while God *does* have an individual will for every detail of our lives, it is not possible, or biblical (nor would it be beneficial or maturing for us as persons), to learn this will in advance of our decisions. This is why I added the emphasis to the quotation from p. 113. If God's will is exhaustive, it includes the details of individual lives but it is still true that there is no individual will "*that must be discovered by the decision maker.*" With this view we could agree with the statement, "The objective for

the believer is not to find the decision God has already made (as in the traditional view), but to make a wise decision" (p. 294). Having said all this, I want to admit that I do not know *why* God's plan would include all things—even such matters as which shoe I put on first. But I do not know when and how to exclude such items, and I prefer to say that God "has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass." I know positively that nothing happens outside his will, and I agree with Friesen that we are not to expect God to reveal that will to us in advance as an aid (!) to our decision making.

Another minor concern relates to Friesen's terminology in evaluating Prov 3:5,6. He agrees with Bruce Waltke's widely circulated comments on this passage. Waltke has affirmed that these verses have "nothing to say about guidance," but that the passage merely promises that "He will make your path smooth." Accordingly, Friesen notes that the passage is "not dealing with specific guidance into an individual 'path' marked out by God" (p. 99). It would seem better to me to insist that the passage is very definitely related to divine guidance. The promise that God will make one's "path smooth" is a promise that God "will be in charge," that he will guide by his sovereign control over the events of one's life. This certainly involves "specific guidance into an individual 'path'"—though it does *not* promise that God will specify the details in advance. It seems difficult to me to legitimately fault the *meaning* of the KJV at this point. How is it possible to say that God "will make your paths straight" (NASB, or "smooth," Waltke), without affirming that in so doing he "shall direct thy paths" (AV)?

Very minor complaints could also be raised against the understanding of the word "mirror" in 2 Cor 3:18 as a reference to the Word (p. 107), and against using 2 Pet 3:9 as a reference to the "desire" of God (pp. 158, 232–33), but these and a few other even more minor matters are hardly worthy of note.

Though all the book is worth reading, the "heart" of the book is in Part Two (pp. 81–147) and I must admit that some of the remaining pages (151–430) seemed a little "draggy" and repetitive. This was also the evaluation of my son and of my father-in-law—though I am confident that anyone holding the "traditional view" and actually facing an important decision would be interested in every word.

Because of the importance of the subject and the general validity of the approach, I believe that this book should be "required reading" for every Christian who is interested in decision making. It is irenic, biblical, and Christ-honoring. It will be an aid to many Christians in helping them to be more biblical in their decision making—and is therefore worth shouting about! Highly recommended.