



STATEMENT DD065

## **A Summary Critique: Decision Making and the Will of God / In Search of Guidance**

Christian books exploring the subject of God's will are numerous. Knowing and/or doing the will of God is often listed among the highest concerns of Christians in America today. A short review cannot take into account all of the available books on the subject, or even all of the variations of views presented in these books. I have chosen to review two books which, while disagreeing with each other in several important areas, are among the most comprehensive and thought-provoking explorations of divine guidance.

### **DECISION MAKING AND THE WILL OF GOD**

The main purpose of Gary Friesen's *Decision Making and the Will of God* is to present a view on guidance which is fundamentally different from what he considers the traditional view. Friesen calls his view "the way of wisdom." He summarizes his viewpoint this way.

#### **Principles of Decision Making The Way of Wisdom**

1. In those areas specifically addressed by the Bible, the revealed commands and principles of God (His moral will) are to be obeyed.
2. In those areas where the Bible gives no command or principle (non-moral 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 (p. 179).

*Decision Making* is divided into four major sections. Each section makes copious use of charts and diagrams to illustrate the main points of Friesen's argument. This makes his development of ideas fairly easy to follow. A danger of using this format, however, is that such visual aids can reduce complicated ideas to simplistic and even erroneous representations. A reader who depends on the charts and diagrams alone to communicate all of the important ideas of this book will not have an accurate understanding of Friesen's thesis.

The first section presents what he calls the "traditional view" concerning divine guidance. It is presented in a fictional format, as though the reader were present at a "traditional" seminar on discerning God's will. Friesen adopts this format, in his words, "to depersonalize the traditional position. For while I disagree with some aspects of the traditional view, I do not wish to disparage any specific individuals who have sincerely taught it" (p. 19). Friesen's fictional seminar leader summarizes the traditional view in the following words:

What we have seen, then, is that there are three aspects to the will of God. We call them God's sovereign will, God's moral will, and God's individual will. As you can readily see, most questions about guidance concern God's individual will. Whenever someone asks, "How can I know God's will for my life?", he is usually seeking God's guidance in some specific decision of his life (p. 37).

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Friesen's main criticism of the traditional view concerns that view's understanding of God's individual will. According to Friesen, the traditional view holds that God has an individual, special, detailed plan for every aspect of every person's life (p. 35). The Christian's task then is to find out what God's individual will is concerning every aspect of his life. God has an individual will concerning choice of mate, school, job, etc. Friesen traces the development of his own divergent view to a struggle he had concerning which college God "wanted" him to attend. His frustration at not being able to discern God's individual will in this matter led him to question his "traditional" view toward guidance (pp. 15-18).

Section Two of *Decision Making* is a critique of the "traditional view" presented in Section One. Friesen agrees that God has a sovereign will ("a predetermined plan for everything that happens in the universe," p. 82), and that God has a moral will ("The Scriptures... clearly reveal all of the moral will of God." *Ibid*).

However, Friesen does not believe in the "traditional" view concerning the individual will of God. In fact, the thesis of his book is based on his alternative view which is:

While there is agreement about the reality of God's moral will, there are differences about the extent to which that moral will provides guidance in the presence of making specific decisions. The traditional view holds that the Bible (God's moral will) gives *most* of the guidance needed to make a decision; but, additionally, knowing God's individual will is essential for complete leading to the correct choice. The alternative view put forth in this book is that the Bible is *fully sufficient* to provide all the guidance needed for a believer to know and do God's will (*ibid*).

The third section of *Decision Making* is a presentation of Friesen's alternative view "the way of wisdom." He makes four basic points: 1) We must be obedient to God's moral will (the Bible); 2) We are responsible to choose within moral parameters; 3) We must make wise decisions according to our spiritual maturity; and 4) We must be ready always to submit to God's overriding sovereignty.

Friesen believes that his view avoids the problems of the traditional view, retains the morality of God's law and retains the sovereignty of God concerning His master plan for the universe and human history.

The final and fourth section of Friesen's book gives examples of applying his "way of wisdom" to everyday situations. It is a counterpart to the first section, which gave fictionalized examples of the use of the traditional view.

There are many positive aspects to Friesen's book. Because his view is such a departure from traditional ideas of an individualized will of God, the reader is challenged to question his own assumptions about guidance and to search the Scriptures carefully. In fact, Friesen challenges readers to test his statements (p. 430).

## **IN SEARCH OF GUIDANCE**

The main thesis of Dallas Willard's *In Search of Guidance* is that guidance is predicated upon the biblical concept of the Christian's intimate personal relationship with God. Willard summarizes the basis of his viewpoint:

The ideal for divine guidance is finally determined by who God is, and who we are, and what a personal relationship between ourselves and God should be like. Failure of competence in dealing with divine guidance has its deepest root in a failure to understand, accept and grow into a conversational relationship with God: that sort of relationship suited to friends who are mature personalities in a shared enterprise, no matter how different they may be in other aspects.

It is within such a relationship that our Lord surely intends us to have, and readily to recognize, His voice speaking in our hearts as occasion demands. I believe that He has made ample provision for this in order to fulfill His mission

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as the Good Shepherd, which is to bring us life and life more abundantly. The abundance of life comes in following Him, and “the sheep follow him; for they know his voice” (John 10:4) (pp. 26-27).

I will divide Willard’s book into four main sections also, although he himself does not label them as such (as did Friesen in his book). The first section, corresponding to the first chapter, acknowledges the great paradox concerning guidance: God speaks, and we are to obey His voice; and yet there is difficulty in discerning God’s voice (pp. 22 -25). The rest of the book proposes principles which can be used to discern God’s will so that the reader will then be able to obey it.

There are helpful discussion questions at the end of each chapter by which the reader can test his understanding of the material he has read. He can then go on to the next ideas, confident that he has understood what Willard is asserting and how he agrees or disagrees with him.

The second section of the book (Chapters Two through Five) develops the idea of individual or personal guidance and gives guidelines for determining when and how God speaks through a variety of means. The third section (Chapters Six and Seven) develops the guidelines as they relate specifically to the Word of God (in its several manifestations, not just in the Bible), as a vehicle for communicating God’s will. He notes, “The Bible is *one* of the results of God’s speaking. It is the *unique* written Word of God, and in conjunction with it God presently speaks to the devout heart ever anew... the Bible is the written Word of God, but the word of God is not simply the Bible: and the way we know that this is so is by paying attention to what the Bible says” (p. 163).

Sections two and three are brought together by the fourth section, Chapters Eight (“Knowing the Voice of God”) and Nine (“Guidance and Beyond: A Life More Than Guidance”). Here Willard’s concern with an integrated and mature Christian life is brought to the fore, and guidance is shown to be the natural and necessary consequence of interpersonal relationships between God and His children. He concludes that:

The person who honestly desires God’s guidance for its own sake and the glory of God, and who, as a part of his total plan for living in harmony with God, adopts the general counsels of Scripture as the framework within which he is to know His daily graces — that person will most assuredly receive God’s specific conscious guidance to him through the inner voice to the extent that such guidance is appropriate in developing his conformation to Jesus Christ. There *is* a limit to which such guidance is appropriate... But it is in general true, as G. Campbell Morgan has written, that “Wherever there are hearts waiting for the Voice of God, that Voice is to be heard” (p. 228).

## COMPARING FRIESEN AND WILLARD

The essential difference between these two books is that Friesen believes normative (i.e., moral) divine guidance comes *only* from Scripture and Willard believes that normative divine guidance comes *specifically* and *particularly* to each believer within the strictures of biblical truth.

Friesen denies the existence of the individualized will of God, saying, “Not only is the individual will of God not found in Scripture, but the suggested process for ending it is absent as well” (pp. 145-146).

Willard asserts that the individualized will of God is a necessary corollary to our relationship with God criticizing Friesen specifically by saying,

Now the emphasis of [Friesen’s] book is upon decision making. Speaking quite generally, however, it seems to me that one of the most damaging things we can do to the spiritual prospects of anyone is to suggest or to teach that God will *not* deal with them specifically, personally, intelligibly, and consciously, or that they cannot *count on* Him to do so. Once we have conveyed this idea to them. It is absurd to go on to try to lead them personal relationship with God (p.122).

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Willard points out that, in agreement with Friesen, there are times when God wants a Christian to choose (e.g., a job, a college, a vacation) to the best of his reasoning ability. However, Friesen assumes that this shows the *absence* of an individualized will of God (pp. 17ff.), while Willard concludes that this shows it is sometimes God's individualized will for *us* to choose (pp. 236ff.). Willard's view can incorporate Friesen's examples.

I will use Friesen's college decision as an example of this. In the beginning of his book, Friesen recounts that his inability to discern God's individual will concerning the college he should attend led him to rethink his whole conviction on God's guidance. Friesen did not "hear" from God about the college he should attend. The seven "road signs" (p. 57) for discerning God's individual will seemed inconclusive. He determined that there were only three possible causes of his inability to hear:

1. Perhaps God was unable to reveal His will. In such a case, the problem would lie with Him.
2. Perhaps there was sinfulness or insincerity on my part. Then, obviously, I would be the cause for my own failure.
3. Perhaps my understanding of the nature of God's will was biblically deficient. If that were true, then the problem would be ignorance (p. 17).

Friesen concludes and presents (throughout his book) that option three was the cause, and assumes that he was wrong to believe in God's individual will. In other words, God had *no* individual will for Friesen's choice of college.

Willard's view would take the same data and three options and conclude that Friesen's understanding of the nature of God's will was deficient, *not* because God had no individualized will, but because he did not see that God's individualized will in that particular instance could have been for Friesen to choose on the basis of his own reason and intelligence which school he wanted to attend. God's will in a specific situation like this does not negate the fact that in other instances his individualized will promotes one particular course of action or choice. Willard notes:

In general, it is the will of God that we ourselves should have a great part in determining our path through life. This does not mean that He is not with us. God both develops and tests our character by leaving us to decide. He calls us to responsible citizenship in His kingdom by - in effect or reality - saying, as often as possible: MY WILL FOR YOU IS FOR YOU TO DECIDE ON YOUR OWN (p. 233).

In conclusion, both *Decision Making and the Will of God* and *In Search of Guidance* are thorough, intriguing, and thought provoking challenges to Christians to study the Scriptures in earnest concerning the subject of divine guidance.

While I think Friesen's thesis is ultimately unconvincing, and neglects the communication inherent in an intimate personal relationship with God, I respect the Christian commitment, careful study and thoughtful consideration with which he developed his ideas and then wrote them out for others. The Christian who carefully considers Friesen's position will emerge afterward with a deeper appreciation for the Word of God and a greater understanding of God's will.

I think that Willard has done a convincing job of developing a consistently biblical view of divine guidance. His careful consideration of Scripture and flowing writing style couple to provide the Christian reader with a sound perspective on developing a Christian view toward guidance; a view which centers on developing an intimate and personal relationship with God.

Both books will enrich a Christian's library.

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— Bob Passantino

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