

# It's Complicated

*A Guide to Faithful Decision Making*

Jack Haberer

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# Introduction

“The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” Or does it? Did it ever? Whenever I see that bumper sticker on a car I sigh a wistful sigh. In fact, I nod in agreement. But my second thought goes more like, “If only. . . .” There was a time when I thought faith was that simple. But then life happened. It got complicated. And when I learned more about what the Bible says, it became apparent that faith wasn’t even that simple for those in the Bible!

Oh, I still believe the Bible. I believe that God inspired its writing. But that is one big book. If God needed that many pages to guide our daily living, perhaps God was clueing us in to the fact that life just isn’t as simple as the bumper sticker claims.

Yet, God did give us such a book. God knew you and I do want to find answers that stand the test of time. We want those answers because we want to be good and we want to do good. We want to do God’s will. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”: More than a few times a week I repeat this line of the Lord’s Prayer. Often, amid a crowd of worshipers, I get caught up in the rhythm of familiar words so ingrained in my brain I can say them without thinking. But when I’ve lingered on this simple appeal, it has made me wonder, “How do I know what God’s will is?”

Discerning God’s will and following it is complicated. Most of us don’t like that. We prefer preachers and prophets who give us simple answers for doing good. We want that bumper sticker to be true. But life just isn’t simple. From planning our daily hour-by-hour schedule to wrestling with the biggest controversies around public policy, from choosing a major in college to choosing a mate

for life, making good decisions, the kinds of decisions that will actually align our will with that of our loving God, is complicated. It takes hard work.

That's what this book is about.

### **Pg-13**

I invite you to dig into this subject of faithful decision making. But I must warn you. This is not a children's book. If the publisher would label it like the movie industry does, it would require a "Parental Advisory" sticker on it. Not that its sexual content will be prurient; nor will violent scenes gush with blood. And you won't find any foul language. It just won't let you get away with childish, simplistic thinking.

Granted, Jesus said that unless you come to him as a child you will not be able to enter his kingdom, but he did not say that you have to remain as a child forever. His kingdom is not inhabited by toddlers alone. And it isn't led by kindergartners.

This book will press you to wrestle with matters of faith and judgment that recognize that complexities, difficulties, and struggles come with the territory. It will pop the bubble of denial, shallowness, and simplistic platitudes that so often masquerade as courageous, principled living. And it will press you to contemplate the good that dwells in your heart and in those with whom you often find yourself at odds.

Good does dwell within us. In fact, from "good morning" to "good night," our days pulsate with yearnings for a goodness that dwells in the farthest reaches of our most heroic dreams.

### **The Best Intentions**

We humans want to be good. In fact, the aspiration toward goodness is so pervasive that in his book *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis cites the existence of human conscience as proof positive of a transcendent divinity.<sup>1</sup> Our consciences demand so much of us and call such

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1952), 31–35.

good out of us that they could have resulted only from the imprint of an eternally holy Creator, suggests Lewis. They serve as a DNA marker for our having been created in God's own image.

Persons who self-identify as followers of Jesus also testify to a growing desire for goodness sparked by their profession of faith. Jesus said to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). For good reason. Any person loving another will seek to please that other one. Anybody loving Jesus will seek both to follow his teachings and to emulate his character.

The apostle Paul testifies that "all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). This, he says, serves the ultimate purpose that Jesus would "be the firstborn within a large family" who are "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29).

This process was anticipated by the prophet Jeremiah, who foresaw the day when God would institute a new covenant with the family of God: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33b). That promise is cited word for word by the writer of the book of Hebrews (8:10) as having been initiated in the new covenant established by Jesus Christ and applied by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul urges the believers to "work out your own salvation," assured that "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12b, 13).

### **The Devil Is in the DNA**

But we're not all sweetness and goodness. Another principle also thrives in the bowels of our beings: the love of the bad. In the 1990s, bad became the new good. Oh, it was one thing to say to a friend, "You look really good." But that compliment paled into nothingness in comparison to the far greater compliment: "You look really bad." That became the ultimate form of flattery. Michael Jackson's song and album *Bad*—which sold something like 879 gazillion copies—tapped into that part of our being that likes to color outside the lines,

to light fireworks, to eat indulgent sweets and fatty meats, to drive above the speed limit, to read novels or watch movies that appeal to our naughty side, our sinful inclinations.

Yes, I used that word *sinful*. Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike trace the practice of sin back to a garden in which the first humans were created in the image of God. Then after violating that image, humanity was banished to a life of exile beyond the garden gates. Nevertheless, God still authorized the humans to play God. God stood by the original commission that the humans should create additional humans in their own image. Those children would now be the first mixed-breed humans: created in the image of the holy God and procreated in the image of their sinful human parents—and of their parents’ parents, and their parents’ parents’ parents, and so on.

As if that were not enough, the trinity of negative influences—the world around, the appetites within, and the powers and principalities prowling about—all push and pull, seduce and incite us to expand the breadth and depth of our waywardness.

### **Cauldrons**

Add those negative influences to the yearning for goodness, and we all find within ourselves cauldrons of conflicted desires. The accounts of humanness so vividly portrayed in the unfolding biblical drama of the people of God catch real individuals at their best and at their very worst. One extends pardon to the brothers that sold him into slavery and incarceration. Another musters the courage to believe that with God’s help he can topple a giant with a few smooth stones. An army crushes evil empires, routing enemy armies simply by lifting their voices in worshipful song. A stranger finds the strength to help Jesus carry his cross.

The biblical accounts catch those same humans trading their birthrights for a bowl of soup. They conjure schemes of self-promotion. They sink into the quicksand of their lust. They refuse to apologize and decline to forgive. They showcase an outward generosity to camouflage their miserliness.

This existential ambivalence threw the welcome baby party in the little town of Bethlehem. There, the young virgin writhed in labor while smelling the donkeys’ excrement. There, the angel chorus sang

in a perfect harmony that the shepherds probably didn't match. And while the star pierced the darkness, it did not pulverize it; night was still night after all. Three-plus decades later, Jesus' death did the opposite: the darkness that eclipsed all hope disintegrated when he burst forth in resurrection light.

By that death and resurrection, Jesus bestowed the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation between humans and their Creator. He granted the gift of righteousness, that is, a right relationship to the holy God. And he initiated a process of changing the lives of all believers by way of sanctifying them, gradually strengthening their true selves—created in God's image—and weakening the grip that their former Godlessness had upon them.

### **But Then What?**

If the grip of badness is loosening its power over believers, how should they then live? The traditional Sunday school response to that question has been, "Follow the Ten Commandments." From Roman Catholics' enumerating sins mortal and venial, to Dutch Reformers printing the Decalogue (lit., "ten words") on the front walls of their sanctuaries, those stone tablets have provided the focal point for civilizations' moral and ethical codes for three millennia.

But we have a problem with the commandments beyond that of our own weakened willpower to follow them. An even bigger problem looms in the hairline fractures that peel through our brains: we don't really and truly believe in those commandments in the way most of us claim.

### **The Troublesome Ten**

A funny thing happens on the way to following the commandments of God: we trip over them.

- We're commanded by Moses to disassociate from false gods, and in the New Testament the apostles (Acts 15) forbid eating food offered to idols. But then the apostle Paul tells the Corinthians to go ahead and eat whatever food their pagan neighbors serve, in effect saying, "Don't ask. Don't tell."

- We're commanded to keep the Sabbath holy—doing no work—yet on one of those days Jesus allows his disciples, while walking through farmland, to harvest, husk, and eat grain just because they didn't want to wait till sundown.
- We're told to honor our parents, but when a man called by Jesus to follow him responds, "First let me go and bury my father." Jesus shuns him, saying, "Let the dead bury their own dead" (Luke 9:60). And on another occasion he says,

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,  
and a daughter against her mother,  
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

(Matt. 10:34–37)

- We're told not to bear false witness, but given the option between offending with the truth and peace making with a white lie, we'll choose the latter at least once in a while.

You name a major commandment in the Bible, and you probably can find a story in the Bible wherein a hallowed superstar violates that very command—and does so with impunity or even with endorsement.

### **Battling Believers**

What's more, followers of Jesus are not exactly of one mind on all matters of morals and ethics. In the present era the loudest debates have revolved around matters of same-gender attraction and relationships. Should the twenty-first-century church be excluding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) expressions of sexual



intimacy as it has through past millennia? Or should the church embrace those of the LGBT community and even consecrate same-gender unions and marriages with the same wonder and joy as surround traditional opposite-gender marriages?

Just about as loud are the internecine battles over life-and-death matters, especially abortion. Should the conception of a child within a womb be celebrated always as a miracle and that fetus be granted protected status? Or should the mother be entrusted with the authority to choose whether to carry to term or to abort that fetus? What about those tragic situations of pregnancies caused by incest or rape, and of medical threats to the mother's own life? What about end-of-life situations, the painful questions surrounding the sustaining of a body via extraordinary measures? And is the death penalty an appropriate application of divine justice or a wretched venting of human vengeance?

What about a citizen's duty to support the environment? And should Christians support and defend Israel—speaking out on behalf of the Jews—Jesus' birth family? Or should Christians support and defend Palestinians, among whom are a significant number of Christians? And what does it look like to be Christian peacemakers in that troubled land? Or, indeed, should both people-groups be held to the same kinds of international laws and standards as other noniconic peoples? And are women and men equals in all respects, or should they be complementary partners with distinct roles to fulfill?

Every major monotheist faith—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—suffers innumerable internal disputes over conflicting viewpoints held by people of intense faith whose ideological passion is prompted by a yearning to be right and good.

### Other Nagging Questions

Apart from the hotly debated controversies, humans of all stripes face age-old questions whose answers continually elude simple explanation:

- How to manage personal finances
- With whom to endeavor to build a life together as family
- How to cope with addictions—one's own and another's
- How to choose a career

This book can't thoroughly tackle all of these topics. But the nagging nature of all of them prompts me to ask in a broad, sweeping way, "How can we know what God would have us to do in such complicated times? Furthermore, can our understanding of God's guidance lead to the kind of empowerment that would actually help us to achieve the better good toward which our best selves aspire?"

### **Another Book?**

What can this book offer to help address such matters? What is my plan? First, I will pull together several kinds of questions into a single framework. Books on morals and ethics abound. Books on discerning one's vocation or calling abound (both secular-vocation books and religious-calling books). Books on understanding God's will for everyday questions abound. This book will tackle all of those questions at once because they are all related. It will tackle practical life questions while keeping sweeping ethical concerns in view. I'll be wearing my priestly alb, my professorial tweed jacket, and my guidance-counselor open-collar shirt all at once.

Second, I will take you on a journey through the Bible to encounter both sweeping themes and the idiosyncratic oddities that seem to defy them. Together we will seek to understand God's will as revealed by Spirit-inspired writers who were dealing themselves in the toughest decisions of their lives in the complicated times of their lives. We will listen intently to Jesus, and we'll watch to see how his disciples interpreted and implemented his mission in foreign lands and divergent cultures long after his ascension took his audible voice away from them. Instead of shushing to silence the Scripture passages that don't match our Sunday school training, we'll embrace them, consider them, and help make sense of them. In the process, we will treat every page of the Bible as inspired by God.

Third, I will help you formulate an interpretive framework for addressing your questions in the light of such biblical teachings. In lectures preparatory to writing this book, I kiddingly have spoken about "doing ethics by spreadsheet." Well, all kidding aside, I will lay out for you four different spreadsheets that will form a logical and faithful way to interpret the Scriptures to be applied to your life. And

while you won't be carrying such spreadsheets in your pockets any more than were Mary, John, Peter, or Paul, hopefully the framework will stick with you to equip you to discern your way through these complicated times.

In the process I will aim to affirm your best intentions, giving language to the learnings that your experiences, study, and intuition all have built into your heart and mind. And, hopefully, you'll be equipped to help others to do the same.

Have you ever watched the on-field interview of the game's most valuable player at a Super Bowl, which is usually the winning team's quarterback? The sportscaster typically asks a simple question: "What was your key to such success?" Typically, the sweaty, exhilarated athlete says something like "It was all about the offensive line. Those guys gave me the time to throw. They opened holes for the running backs. They were just spectacular." No doubt those normally unsung, little-noticed linemen deserve credit and appreciate being singled out like that, but, truth be told, there are a lot of other reasons for the team's success:

- The heroic pass catching of the wide receivers
- The speedy ball carrying of the running backs
- The stifling defensive play that went on while that quarterback was sitting on the bench
- The brilliant coaching coming from the sidelines
- The encyclopedic research prepared in advance by the teams' scouts
- The savvy trades made by the team's coaches in the off-season
- The millions of dollars invested by the team's owner to put all that talent together on one team

Christian decision making usually gets explained in simple categories and simplistic, reductionist logic. In reality, however, it operates in complex, intricate, overlapping, and ambiguous ways. Most of us make good decisions much of the time, but like the victorious quarterback, we explain our decision-making processes to our friends and children in ways that don't actually match how we really made those decisions. We don't know how to preach what we practice.

## In a Nutshell

This book hopes to help you, the reader, to think through your practices and to figure out how to tell others the same. To preach what, indeed, you practice. Specifically, my goal is to help you articulate an authentically Christian way of discerning God's will for your personal life decisions (both the big ones and the small ones) and for your life together with others in Christian community—indeed, in the whole kingdom of God.

By *authentically* I mean “honestly”: not claiming to be something or someone that you are not; not pretending to others or yourself that things are better or worse than they really are; not discounting your own character nor exaggerating your own culpability; and not pretending that God makes all stories have happy endings. To be authentic is to be genuine, true, and transparent.

By *Christian way of discerning God's will*, I do not exclude the Jewish and Muslim way of discerning God's will. However, this book will specifically tap the principles taught and modeled in both the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament and in the Christian New Testament, treating those two sets of documents as the Word of God. The whole Bible will be our textbook, taking seriously not only the clear, definitive commands found therein but also the vague, confusing, odd commands and incidents reported as well. I will show how the Bible itself gives us clues on how to integrate the points of inconsistency and ambiguity.

Your search to learn how to *discern God's will for your personal life and for your life together with others* will hold those two realms together. We won't allow our American individualism to eclipse our life in community. We won't allow community goals and needs to trample over individual rights and responsibilities. And the community we will address will include not only your nuclear family and local congregation but also the larger church of the denominational and ecumenical world. It will even include the kingdom of God that was first glimpsed four thousand years ago when a man and woman were told to leave their homeland to go to a place prepared for them. This is the God thing that God is doing in the world—proceeding toward the day when all can say that the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and Christ, just as he

taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven.”

Ultimately, my hope is that we together will discover a truly ethical way of living, will actualize maturity in Christ, and will show forth a witness of authenticity and candor that bring credit to the faith and that cause our lives to sing a new song of joy. You see, what’s so great about being good is that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, unleashed on the world by the love of God, makes possible the experience of communing together in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit’s power has been unleashed in us to teach and to empower us to desire and to actually implement the Lord’s work in the world.

But what about the will of God? How might we discern it? How can we know and live the greater good? Let us together seek faithful answers to these questions in order to help us make faithful decisions all toward the end of living faithful lives.

# 1

## Searching for Certitude

**A**n oft-told story about the late Bishop Fulton Sheen references a sidewalk conversation he had with a young boy. Sheen was scheduled to speak in Philadelphia at town hall. He decided to walk there from his hotel even though he was unfamiliar with the city. Sure enough, he got lost and was forced to ask some boys to direct him to his destination.

One of them asked Sheen, “What are you doing there?”

“I’m going to give a lecture,” said the bishop.

“About what?”

“On how to get to heaven. Would you care to come along?”

“Are you kidding?” said the boy. “You don’t even know how to get to town hall.” In today’s world, Sheen could have found his way by pulling out his smartphone and telling it where he wanted to end up, and it would have guided his every step. But most of life’s decisions have not been simplified by twenty-first-century technologies.

### **Two Questions**

We still are pressed to answer two questions: What is the right thing to do? And how can you know for sure? Those two questions have commanded the attention of persons from the beginning of time.

Some have applied themselves to intense academic study of ethics to find out. Others have sought the counsel of astrologers or Tarot card readers. Some have traveled the high seas to find a wise guide. Others have leaned on the charismata of knowledge, discernment, and wisdom. Many have read their respective holy book(s). More than anything, Christians have looked to the Bible to guide them.

The language used across the spectrum of Christian traditions ranges widely. Some seek “God’s perfect will” while accepting “God’s permissive will.” Others participate in discernment groups. Some testify, “God is leading me to. . . .” Others say, “I am following God’s call on my life.” What they all hold in common is the confidence that God really does have a plan, a specific purpose for their lives. Some pursue such insights expecting open-ended options. They will pray for God to open their eyes to see what God intends for them, but they won’t sit around waiting for lightning to strike. Others expect a custom-designed plan to guide them. They heard along the way, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” So they watch and pray for that plan to appear like the handwriting on the wall or, in more modern terms, as directions drawn on a Google Maps site. Others are willing to take it one turn at a time, as in a GPS navigation system in the car.

### **One Perfect Plan?**

How awesome is it to think that God has a specific plan for your life? The prospect of that sounds compelling. *Wow, the almighty, transcendent God of the universe has singled me out for something big to do!* How dignifying that is. Such a claim seems to match the affirmation of Jeremiah: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jer. 29:11).

But was Jeremiah intending that promise for you in particular? As a matter of fact, the promise was expressed to a plurality of persons. The word of assurance was proclaimed to the people of Israel, akin to something a president may promise to the nation as a whole. Does it mean, “I have a specific plan for each and every one of you, down to the finest detail of every decision each one will ever make?”

When speaking of God’s good plan for our lives, we generally turn the promise into our hopes for our own lives and those of our loved

ones. Surely, we reason, just as Jesus promised to prepare a place in heaven for us to enjoy our eternal rest, so too he has promised to lead us to the perfect church, the perfect set of friends, the perfect college and major to study, the perfect career, the perfect spouse.

Success seems to stand just one set of instructions away from the moment. If only we could order directions like a three-course meal from a menu, then God's plan for our lives would begin to play itself out perfectly. In effect, this model of guidance is conditioned simply on the assignment to follow directions. The transcendent global-positioning-satellite reader guides you every step of the way. Churches of all kinds of stripes have been broadcasting this set of promises for decades.

But in 1988, Garry Friesen, a professor at Multnomah Bible College in Portland, Oregon, turned that thinking on its ear. His book *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* dismantled the road-map model of discerning God's will. As Friesen outlines it, the traditional approach takes literally the modern evangelists' promise "God has a wonderful plan for your life," which, he claims, has turned the Christian journey into a treasure hunt—with the sure promise that if only you can decipher the particular plan designed for your life, all will go well with you.

Friesen characterizes that traditional approach as the search for the "bull's eye" of God's will—knowing that when taking bow and arrow in hand, reaching anything outside the target's perfect center stands as a failure. But what happens when you find what appears to be the bull's eye and the treasure map takes you to that new job to which God called you, but your boss morphs into an arrogant ogre? What does that say about God's wonderful plan for your life? Should you just assume that you missed the bull's eye of God's plan, proceed to quit the job, and, with God's help, find the job your Lord had really intended you to have all along?

Or if you think God has led you to the right spouse but she or he turns into an abusive drug addict, what then? What does that say about God's wonderful plan for your life? Should you just assume and acknowledge that you missed the bull's eye, divorce that person, and, with God's help, find the actual perfect spouse God intended you to have all along? Or should you just try to love that partner into better behavior, pretending to others that you're living in marital



bliss—if only to protect God's reputation—thereby being a mere enabler of escalating violence?

Sure, this sounds melodramatic, but too many evils have been perpetuated and enabled by victims protecting others' reputations—including that of their supposedly loving Lord. The search for the bull's eye too often leads to miles and piles of troubles. Such a search often leads to irresponsible behavior by the believer at hand. If life's successes result from being in the right place, then being the energetic worker or loving spouse or caring parent or studious professor or script-memorizing actor or attentive police officer gets short shrift. In the real world, success has more to do with what you do than with where you are.

### **Baggage**

The God's-wonderful-plan notion, attractive as it sounds, carries so much baggage that it's almost nonsensical. For one thing, few believers actually order their lives according to it. Sure, when facing really major decisions, like whom to marry, many an earnest believer will pray for God's will to be made clear. They may even see if the "channel markers" align—circumstances, inner witness, wise counsel from others, personal desires, common sense, and special guidance—to give a clear answer to their prayerful questioning. However, even earnest, God-honoring adherents make moment-by-moment decisions about matters of monumental significance—like changing lanes on a highway—without exploring any of these guidance systems.

For another thing, this bull's-eye approach breeds a dangerous subjectivity. Its God-centered talk actually disguises its self-centered mentality: "What is God's plan for my life?" implies, oh, so subtly, that God exists for me. Such self-absorption can foster eccentric actions and emotionalism—where feelings trump good judgment, intelligence, and analysis. It sometimes leads to one superspiritual person outshouting another.

Imagine yourself being the parent of a young-adult son who begins his morning every day by calling you on the phone: "Mom, just checking in to see what I should be doing today. What should I do?" In all likelihood, you'd tell your son to get out of bed and get to school or work. Or you'd tell him to call his therapist. Or worse, you would have him committed to a psychiatric hospital.

We don't think of mature adults as people who are simply waiting to be given orders for their day. Even basic training—that military process that establishes a bottom line of taking orders—quickly moves recruits from blind obedience to the formation of the kind of character that can make wise decisions moment-by-moment in the most harrowing of situations. Would our loving sovereign Parent expect us to be imbeciles?

One other bit of bull's-eye baggage is its tendency to turn the Christian journey into one of endless searching for special knowledge, a kind of enlightenment. The ancient Christians dubbed this Gnosticism. They called it a heresy. Drawn from the Greek word *gnosko* literally, “to know,” the gnostics searched endlessly for—and sometimes claimed to have received—a kind of knowledge that was kept for them alone, one not shared with average, pedestrian people.

Gnosticism flies in the face of the good news of the self-disclosing God. From the first conversations with humans in Eden to the incarnation of God's Son in Bethlehem, from the delivery of the Ten Commandments to Moses to the revelation recorded by the apostle John, God's will is not shrouded in mystery to be doled out piecemeal by soothsayers or mountain mystics. God's will has been made known by the Word-made-flesh, as conveyed in the written word.

Gnosticism also misses the fact that Christian living is built on the grace of God embraced via trust, not on the mysteries of God caught via mystical insight. It is a religion consisting essentially of faith in action, not ideas in contemplation.

Ultimately, the bull's-eye model simply misses the Bible's call to grow in wisdom. If, as is often said, wisdom is “applied knowledge,” then people of wisdom are students of all kinds of understanding, analysts of life's lessons, practitioners of good judgment, masters of common sense, and followers of the will and ways of God that have been made known in God's word. These believers have learned a different way to understand and apply God's will and ways because they have learned to change the question.

### **Changing the Question**

If those subscribing to the bull's-eye model of discernment repeatedly ask, “What is God's perfect plan for my life,” then people of wisdom ask, “How might I make a godly decision about what

I should do?" This alternative question presumes that the person already enjoys at least a basic level of knowledge. Indeed, the words from Micah 6:8 that say we are required to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God begin with the summary statement "He has told you, O mortal, what is good." As the voice of conscience tells us, we don't need a prophetic utterance to know that some behaviors are obligatory, some advisable, some dangerous, and others unconscionable.

This question implicitly acknowledges that ours is a multiple-choice world. We aren't offered just one right option—God's perfect will—amid a sea of monstrous alternatives. In fact, many choices do not pose moral dilemmas. Many, if not most, simply require us to choose one good option from among many possibilities.

This new question also lends itself to a great invention: the mid-course correction. Watch any competitive sporting event. If one strategy doesn't score the goal, then the coach sends in another. If the pitcher keeps walking the batters, a relief pitcher is brought to the mound.

To ask, "How might I make a godly decision about what I should do?" allows a person to postulate multiple strategies, to glean elements from one, mix them with another one or two or more, continue exploring questions while experimenting with possible answers, and making adjustments at every point along the way.

Even more importantly, this question invites us to take responsibility for our actions rather than put all of the initiative and therefore both credit and blame for the results on God. And yes, sometimes things go wrong because we made a bad judgment call. Sometimes we fail because we violated what we knew we should do. Sometimes things go badly because somebody else made a mistake. And sometimes bad things do happen to good people.

### **The Mind of Christ**

Asking ourselves how we can make godly decisions presses us to be good students of God's word and will. Building on what we said above about knowing God's will does not mean that we always know it on our own. The search for wisdom challenges us to do our research, to become conversant with God's word.

Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, the apostle Paul asks, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” He answers simply. “But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). Most of us, however, have the mind of the Screen Writers Guild. Or of a particular brand of broadcast journalism. Or of a political party. Or of our family roots. Biblical prophets heard multiple voices and influences, but they did aim to be shaped by God’s word:

Your words were found, and I ate them,  
 and your words became to me a joy  
 and the delight of my heart;  
 for I am called by your name,  
 O LORD, God of hosts.  
 (Jer. 15:16)

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
 reviving the soul;  
 the decrees of the LORD are sure,  
 making wise the simple;  
 the precepts of the LORD are right,  
 rejoicing the heart;  
 the commandment of the LORD is clear,  
 enlightening the eyes;  
 the fear of the LORD is pure,  
 enduring forever;  
 the ordinances of the LORD are true  
 and righteous altogether.  
 More to be desired are they than gold,  
 even much fine gold;  
 sweeter also than honey,  
 and drippings of the honeycomb.  
 (Ps. 19:7–10)

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

These writers' reflections span hundreds of years, but they all share in common a love for, an appetite to ingest, and an ongoing pattern of analyzing, studying, and seeking to apply God's self-revelation. They trusted that most of what they needed to know had been taught them in the Holy Scriptures, and they were applying themselves to see God's words unfold before, around, and within them.

### **Discernment?**

So what about your discernment? That very word has become one of the most widely used buzzwords of the early twenty-first century in spirituality circles. Still, the term *discernment* often echoes the "bull's eye" mind-set outlined above. Many of its proponents seem to suggest that the search for a certain path and destination can be ascertained before taking the first step. It also suggests that once decided, one need make no course corrections or even adjustments along the way, but life just does not work that way. Sometimes one's step out into the unknown will feel like the appropriate response to a perceived prod from providential directional signals, but the mature, adult Christian will make numerous adjustments along the way. Wisdom requires that.

If we are going to take our language seriously, then we need to acknowledge that the biblical word *discernment* is used exclusively to speak of spiritual insight to assess the origin of an idea, an attitude, or behavior. Does it come from God or from the forces of evil? In fact, "discernment of the spirits" (1 Cor. 12:10) correlates with the exorcising of demons as practiced by Jesus and the apostles. Or, as specifically declared in 1 Cor. 2:14, "the person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." That hardly matches the simple act of asking God for guidance envisioned by regular Christian folk.

What is needed for believers is not a singular strategy to discover the one right thing God has planned but the cultivation of the kind of wisdom with which one can make godly decisions about what one should do. What one needs is to so imbibe the mind of Christ as revealed in Scripture that one can be conversant with and attentive

to the guidance provided by the revealed words of God. Of course, actually learning God's will through the reading of the Bible is more easily said than done. That book is complicated, just as life is complicated. We will need to take a closer look at the holy writ of Scripture to see what insights it can give us. We turn to that subject in the next chapter.