



Session I

# How Does God Guide Our Decisions?

“Asking the right questions in research” is the topic we’ve been given. So, why should we be working on this question? How do we do our research from a Christian point of view? Is this really a Christian question at all? Is this question something that is played out at the level of “Who am I going to marry?” or at the level of “What am I going to do this afternoon as soon as I can extricate myself from this faculty meeting?” My experience has been the latter. Asking the right questions in research usually involves ordinary, mundane Christian decision-making.

These are questions of “spiritual dimensions of everyday choice.” It’s a subject on which there have been approaching a thousand books published. It’s a late twentieth-century phenomenon, and particularly a North American phenomenon. I was talking to someone from Singapore the other day who said, “Well, all the books on this seem to come out of the United States.” Actually, it probably goes along with Day-timer schedule books and “to do” lists.

While there is certainly a cultural aspect to this, I think decision-making is actually also very much at the heart of Christianity. So I think it’s fair to ask a second hard-nosed question, “Why should we spiritualize our mundane choices about anything, and certainly about work?” Is there some real basis for this or is it a crazy kind of thing that Christians get into occasionally? Is it reality or self-deception?

I became a Christian in 1978 just about the same time Charles Harper (see p. 225) was a student in my class. Then I didn’t know much about asking the right questions. However, I’ve learned a little bit over the years. I’ve found that self-deception is indeed a very central issue. “Who’s kidding

whom” is really something that comes into play. If I have really set my heart on something, but at the same time desire God’s will, I find it extremely difficult to find out what the will of God is for me in that specific situation. Self-deception is a key issue in this. I think it’s particularly true for intellectuals like ourselves; it’s very easy for us to rationalize.

My brother, who is a philosopher of science, says that philosophers are very good at rationalizing whatever they hold to for very nonrational reasons, and that most formal philosophies are the development of that rationalization.

Another way to phrase our question might be, “Is my Christian decision-making simply a very thin Christian veneer over the way we all do things in science?” I know in my own work that I think a lot rationally and analytically—about science and how it works, how it develops, what its dynamics are, where things are going, and where intellectual insights can be gained. In speaking seriously of Christian decision-making, we’re claiming that it is not just putting some veneer over our analytical, rational, and normal human emotional and cultural ways of making decisions. Does this Christian aspect of decision-making really penetrate the interior or is it just on the outside? I think that’s a serious question.

I would say from my own experience that many major aspects of Christian decision-making in science are very much like



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the decision-making of all my colleagues who are not Christians. But some aspects of my decisions about my science and my group's science are really quite different from the way my colleagues make decisions. I don't think that I'm deceiving myself in thinking there are some fundamental differences. Yet, self-deception is a tremendous issue with which we have to deal. For this reason, I think it's useful to look in the mirror of Scripture where we can see ourselves more clearly.

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### Three Biblical Models of Decision-Making

#### 1. Jesus' Example

While many biblical principles deal with decision-making, I want to look at three different human models beginning with Jesus as the prime model of the godly life. We know a lot about Jesus from the Gospels. We see Jesus making decisions in many different ways. So how does he go about doing that? One thing that impressed me as a new Christian, and still does today, was that Jesus says that he does nothing and says nothing on his own authority. This is an incredible thing. How do we make decisions as individualistic Americans?

When we look at Jesus as a model of decision-making, we find something really different. The Gospel of John is more straightforward than the synoptic Gospels in this, although you will find it in the synoptics as well. In John, Jesus repeats himself over and over again. Eventually you start to get it as you read through John a few times. He says many, many times that he's not speaking on his own. What he says and how he says it is from the Father. It's not on his own authority at all. He is really conformed to the will of the Father. He says, "My food is to do the will of him and complete it" (4:34). We can look at that in many different aspects and facets and with many different subtleties and nuances. But basically what I see there is Jesus talking about how he decides what to say and do.

Nothing is done apart from the Trinity. There is no individualism here. Jesus is submitting to the Father. A very interesting

dynamic occurs between the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. There's sharing authority, giving authority and glory, and submitting in various different ways. As a model for Christian decision-making, the decision-making of Jesus is very much Trinitarian. It's not monist. Many have tried to make Christianity into a monist religion. But I think the Trinity is the essence here.

We are adopted as daughters and sons in Christ. So should we be acting and speaking on our own authority? Of course, Jesus spoke with authority. People noticed that he spoke with authority. But this was not on his own authority—he was conformed to the dynamic of the Trinity.

I think about this when I'm sitting in a faculty meeting with other faculty members in my department. How do I speak in this faculty meeting? Am I speaking on my own authority? As a new Christian, reading through Proverbs was a wonderfully practical and tremendous education for me. I know that Jesus read Proverbs. Certainly, Proverbs and other biblical principles were part of his decision-making. But there's a specificity to the situation, to what you actually can say. There's a contingent reality of what's going on in the faculty meeting, and it's not just a case of deciding what to speak based on biblical principles, but rather there is a dynamic of being part of the Body of Christ, in the fellowship of the Trinity, not speaking on our own authority.

#### 2. Paul's Example

Our next model is Paul. We know a lot about Paul. He's a very interesting character. Let's focus on his decision-making about mission strategy. In the New Testament book of Acts, Luke is talking about traveling across Turkey. The whole world is open to the Gospel there. Paul clearly has a desire to preach the Gospel where it's never been heard before. But in a sense, that's easy for him. There are many virgin mission fields.

In contrast to Paul, consider a man who used to run my computer system who is now a missionary. He read *Operation World* by Patrick Johnstone. You may know this book as a guide to prayer. It has informa-

tion about the state of the church in every country in the world. My friend found a country where there are no known Christians and that was good enough for him. He didn't agonize over God's direction. He knew the great commission, and this place had no church. So he didn't have the problem that Paul had, deciding which country to go to. It was very simple for my friend. In fact, now there is a church—a persecuted church—in this country today. It's exciting.

But in Paul's case, we see a very curious thing. He's going through different potential mission fields, and the Spirit keeps closing the doors and does not allow Paul's team to go into certain areas. Finally, they get to the point where Paul has a dream of seeing a Macedonian saying, "Come over here to Macedonia." Everyone agrees that the Lord is specifically showing them that the place is Macedonia. So they go across and have a fruitful time there. This is a case with a dynamic similar to what we saw with Jesus and the Trinity. Through a dream, Paul has an interaction, a communication involving the Spirit. Although Paul is the leader, a whole mission team is also involved.

I view this as another model for Christian decision-making in science. There are so many aspects of the universe that we can study. We're working on the perimeters of knowledge. Many things have been studied, but there's still an enormous amount out there to be discovered. We have lots of choices in what we can do, each in our own scope. We ask, "Should I go into this or should I go into that?" We have different opportunities. We have different skills. How do we actually decide what to do? We've got to make a decision. Is this something that I make on my own or do I do this as a Christian together with the Trinity and the body of Christ in some way?

In my own decision-making in science since I've become a Christian, this kind of Macedonian model has been fairly common. There have been many cases in which I have made serious decisions in my science that are not just rationally looking at the science and opportunities, but where I actually have felt that the Lord wanted me to go and do something specific. I did it and I didn't really see any particular reason for



doing it, but it was fruitful. I could tell you many stories about that, but I'll share only one.

I used to do a lot of work in Taiwan about 20 to 25 years ago. Taiwan is a geologically new mountain range, sort of like the Alps, growing up offshore of China. It's like having the Swiss Alps just 150 km offshore of South Carolina. We learned a lot about the mechanics of mountain building—the basic understandings were actually developed and tested there. It was a very successful time. But this was long ago. I had not been to Taiwan for ten or fifteen years. (I tend to like to work on one thing for a while and then go and work on other things.) I had no plans to return.

But a very large 7.6 scale earthquake occurred in Taiwan about a year ago. The epicenter was within a kilometer or so of an area on the fault that I had studied in detail. But I still didn't have any particular desire to go back and start a new research project there. I was very busy with other projects. However, I prayed about this. The Lord really showed me that I should return. I was invited to go and I did. The motivation was obedience, not scientific vision. As a result of my trip, some unexpected and tremendous new things have developed sci-

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tifically. We are making some very exciting new discoveries.

This is an example of decision-making in science that is perhaps in the Macedonian model. In fact, I would say that most of the major discoveries I've had in science have been handed to me as a gift. They were like a feast in the presence of my enemies, probably. I could not have made career plans that would have led to any of the significant things in which I've been involved. It's particularly in the context of Christian decision-making that they have played out. And the fruit is not all scientific. There also have been students and collaborators who have come into the Kingdom.

### 3. The Eleven Apostles' Example

Here's another New Testament model that I find quite interesting: Acts 1. This is a challenge even if you're making your decisions in a biblical way. For instance, in your church, how does your board of elders actually make decisions? Do you remember this situation? The disciples had just lost Judas. They needed an apostle to replace him and somehow they had to choose between two candidates. It's not quite clear how they chose the two, but there must have been certain criteria. We don't know what the politics were. The basic problem was that they were choosing an apostle and there were lots of things they didn't know.

Similarly in a lot of decision-making in science, we don't know the consequences of setting a particular course. Certainly Paul didn't know the consequences of his going to one mission field or another. We cannot predict the future effectively. In this case, they didn't know who was God's apostolic choice. So they ended up praying and then casting lots. This is chance. You just flip a coin. That's it. There was a clear sense that this method would show the group God's will. While there is a fear of randomness in Christianity today, the biblical view in both the Old and New Testaments is that God is in control of chance completely. We see this played out in this example. It's a challenge to our modern sensibilities.

## Conclusion

I think these models are examples of biblical ways of going about deciding things. They do not represent the ways my colleagues make decisions in science. This is finding out God's will in highly specific situations. All of the cases we've looked at involve the claim of transmitted information.

At the basic level, the most fundamental claim of Christianity or Judaism is that God communicates. The theological knowledge claims of Christianity are not things that you can deduce from first principles. Philosophical theology does not arrive at these knowledge claims. They can only be sustained through a claim that information is transmitted. This communicative aspect is essential.

I find these New Testament models really striking. They are really quite different from business as usual, and they illuminate the communicative nature of God. There is submission, sharing of authority and glorification, and interaction that occurs in communication. So, "Why does God care about our research?"—It's the very essence of God's character, the Trinitarian God. ☆

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