

Notes about living as a Christian

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continuous conversion

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Following God's guidance, Part Two

In the June 2009 issue of continuous conversion, I looked at three common methods of discerning God's guidance:

- **BY READING THE BIBLE**
- **BY TALKING WITH FELLOW CHRISTIANS (THE "COUNSEL OF THE SAINTS")**
- **BY PRAYING ("THE AFFIRMATIVE AND FERVENT PRAYER OF A RIGHTEOUS MAN AVAILETH MUCH.")**

This issue will cover five more well-known ways of knowing God's will:

From inside:

- **By listening to one's inner turmoil/inner peace**
- **By one's inner leading: (accumulated personal wisdom)**

From outside:

- **By the "no coincidence" theory"**
- **By noting a door closing or opening**
- **By laying a fleece**

By listening to one's inner turmoil/inner peace & by one's inner leading

These two ways of knowing God's will can be looked at together, as both are subjective; that is, they are based on your inner life and can't be examined as objective fact.

How you feel about what you do is a huge part of spiritual guidance. In fact, for most people, this is the ultimate test of God's will: "how do I feel about doing this?" Few Christians will do

something that feels completely wrong. The Holy Spirit has more than enough power to speak to most sincere Christians and to prevent them from terrible evil-doing.

The problem with this approach is that Christians are commanded not merely to avoid evil but to actively do good:

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
 And what does the LORD require of you?
 To act justly and to love mercy
 and to walk humbly with your God."*

Micah 6:8

Our inner life may be a good guide to turn us from evil, but can it pull us toward good? Over-reliance on inner guidance leads, too often, to complacency and then apathy.

By the "no coincidence" theory"

This particular method of following God's guidance makes me very nervous. If followed too rigorously, it slides into superstition, which is the confusion of cause and effect.

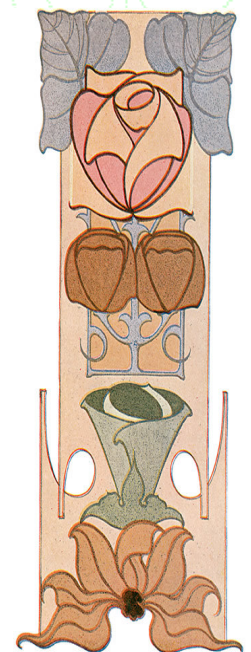
According to the "no coincidence" theory, there **are** no coincidences (things which happen at the same time for no apparent reason). Everything that happens in the life of the Christian believer is God-ordained.

Of course, this is true. It's also not true at all. It's true, in that God watches His children's lives very closely and won't allow any harm to come to them except that which He permits. By this logic, God knows all that will happen to us before it happens.

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Gideon lays his fleece—from a fresco in a Serbian monastery



By the “no coincidence” theory” (cont.)

Since God knows all, and cares about His children, there are no coincidences.

But hold on! Note that God cares—He does not control. We aren't puppets; we never can relinquish our will once and for all; we must submit to God daily. If we understand that God cares but does not control, we can see that He is not manipulating our every move. We have free will; there are coincidences.

And when we deal with non-Christians who are not necessarily following God's will, those interactions can't be completely controlled by God. Therefore some things will be, simply, coincidences.

God uses everything in our lives for our good, but He respects our freedom of will and allows us to do as we choose. To believe that He tyrannically controls everything is to fall into pagan superstition.

By the closing or opening of a door

This method is fraught with potential misinterpretation, as it involves us looking at metaphorical doors, not actual doors. Metaphors by nature are open to interpretation as they are symbols of other things. So looking around for symbolic doors, then seeing if they are open or closed, is an undertaking reserved for the brave, the conceited or the foolish!

I have most often heard this method used as a consolation for a closed door (personal disappointment) in a Christian's life. While it may take away some of the sting, this is not a practical method of guidance.

By “Laying a fleece”

In Judges 6:37, Gideon lays a fleece (sheep's wool) on the ground as a test of God's guidance.

“I will put a wool fleece on the threshing floor tonight. If the fleece is wet with dew in the morning but the ground is dry, then I will know that you are going to help me rescue Israel as you promised.”

This test of God is shocking! How could Gideon have so much arrogance as to tell God how to guide him? Perhaps Gideon was following God's guidance by setting up the test, or maybe God blessed the test in spite of Gideon's wrong idea—but in any event, I would hesitate to order God as to how to guide me!



My personal perspective on God's guidance

Many years ago I read a book called *Take Another Look at Guidance* by Bob Mumford. According to a review by Gregory Asimakoupoulos at bible.org., Mumford

“compares discovering God's will with a sea captain's docking procedure: A certain harbor in Italy can be reached only by sailing up a narrow channel between dangerous rocks and shoals. Over the years, many ships have been wrecked, and navigation is hazardous. To guide the ships safely into port, three lights have been mounted on three huge poles in the harbor. When the three lights are perfectly lined up and seen as one, the ship can safely proceed up the narrow channel. If the pilot sees two or three lights, he knows he's off course and in danger.

God has also provided three beacons to guide us. The same rules of navigation apply—the three lights must be lined up before it is safe for us to proceed. The three harbor lights of guidance are:

- 1. The Word of God (objective standard)***
- 2. The Holy Spirit (subjective witness)***
- 3. Circumstances (divine providence)”***

God's will for us is not easy to discern. No one method is foolproof; the journalist's rule of “three sources” also applies to God's guidance. Sometimes we get the big picture; sometimes we see only tiny shards at a time. Sometimes we feel very confident that we know God's will for us; sometimes we are adrift.

It's hard to hear God's voice in our lives. It's harder to discern His will, and it's hardest to do His will. Often His will seems to be missing the point—we want what we want, now! Why wait? Why put aside our own ideas about how to proceed? Why? Because He cares, and He will fashion our lives into something beautiful for Him, if we follow His will, not our own.