



continuous conversion

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Discerning God's guidance (Part I)

by Sara Tusek

Since 1975, when I encountered God in a life-changing way, I've tried to discern His guidance. And I can tell you frankly: it's not easy.

No doubt it's my fault it's not easy, as surely God is more than ready to guide me. So I'm left in the awkward position of struggling against myself as I try to discern and follow His specific guidance for me.

Of course I'm not alone in this struggle, and I've noticed a few common ways people try to figure out God's guidance. Here is Part One of a look at the pros and cons of some typical methods of seeking guidance.

BY READING THE BIBLE

This seems like a very good option. The Bible is God's Word. It is a complex, lengthy book of history, poetry, drama, and advice, providing a wealth of insight into God's relationship with the humans He created.

Looking here for guidance makes sense. But over the years I've discerned a couple of pitfalls.

1. *You can't take everything literally*
2. *You can't take everything metaphorically*

1. You can't take everything literally

The Book of Leviticus makes a number of pronouncements that became laws for the early Jews. These laws, from our modern perspective, range from the triv-

ial ("do not mix two different fibers in the same cloth") to the appalling ("stone the one who...").

Most present-day Jews and Christians pick and choose which biblical laws to follow, including New Testament pronouncements of St. Paul as to women teaching in church, uncovering their heads in church, and so on.

One thread running through many biblical principles is keeping things apart (the sacred and the profane, for example, can't be mixed—and neither can the dishes on which you serve milk or meat products, if you are an observant Jew). It makes sense that keeping things separate and uncontaminated is a preoccupation in societies where health and social order depend on strict segregation to avoid potential harm. But in the modern world, with its interconnected trans-

portation, communication and distribution systems, keeping things separate is very difficult. And for what? The practicality of some biblical laws is questionable.

Many of the ancient biblical taboos seem unnecessary or even criminal (slaying your neighbor yourself, regardless of his offense, is against the law in most modern countries). And even if you want to, you really can't literally follow the Bible these days. *My Year of Living Biblically* by A. J. Jacobs has many funny stories of the awkward situations Jacobs encountered when he tried to live by every biblical laws he could find.

2. You can't take everything metaphorically

I would love to see the Bible as one very long extended metaphor of God's love for humans. This idea fits into my experience of teaching literature, and would let us look at the Bible in an artistic way.

Too bad this is not a correct perspective on the Bible. Many parts of the Bible are stories, and some of them are metaphors—Jesus told parables (a particular type of metaphor) to illustrate His teachings.

For example, the parable of the mustard seed is a metaphor: the mustard seed is tiny but produces a big tree/faith is tiny to start but grows to a great size when nurtured.

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2. You can't take everything metaphorically (cont.)

But just as many parts of the Bible are not metaphors. The historical accounts are facts; the accounts of the miracles performed by Christ, and the activities of His disciples after His crucifixion and ascension to heaven, are facts.

Around the close of the 19th century, mainstream American Christianity divided into two camps, the biblical literalists (also called Fundamentalists) and the modernists (who saw the Bible as having much in common with any work of literature, prone to inaccuracies, mistranslations and misinterpretations).

The two groups haven't yet settled their differences, with literalists insisting that every word of the Bible came straight from God and is completely true in its literal implications, and modernists contending that much, if not all, of the Bible is a volume of spiritual poetry that speaks to people's intuition and psyche rather than to their rational minds.

So reading the Bible to discern God's guidance is not as simple as it seems. What is to be taken as literal truth? What's a command, and what's an opinion (St. Paul notes that a few of his statements are his own interpretation, not inerrant truth)?

It's too easy to flip through the Bible till you find an answer that suits you (this flipping and pointing is called "proof-texting"), rather than emptying yourself of all pre-conceived ideas and seeking God with humility.*

**(Note: this discussion doesn't delve into the question of "which Bible? In what language? What version and translation?" There are many fine books on this thorny topic.)*

BY TALKING WITH FELLOW CHRISTIANS: THE "COUNSEL OF THE SAINTS"

This is an extremely popular way to look for God's guidance. Like reading the Bible, it seems logical to ask the people who should know best—your brothers and sisters in Christ—what is God's will for you.

And in a perfect world, this type of guidance would be just about ideal. It would meld godliness with human limitations, and give you advice that's both spiritual and practical.

But the big danger here is to discern which of your fellow Christians to heed. Which are "real" Christians, who have no hidden agenda or desire to control you in a ungodly way? And which are wolves in sheep's clothing, a biblical metaphor that describes those "fake" Christians who only want to use you for their own schemes.

And even if you could sort out your Christians properly, you'd still be left with the problem that no human is perfect; even "real" Christians are just sinners saved by grace. So their counsel might be wrong.

And then there's the problem that some Christians consider it proper to share your situation with other Christians, so they can pray for you. This is not gossip! It's saintly counsel.

But it often looks and sounds just like gossip.

BY PRAYING:

"THE AFFIRMATIVE AND FERVENT PRAYER OF A RIGHTEOUS MAN AVAILETH MUCH"

"Affirmative" means that you expect that your request will be fulfilled, if it is a proper prayer. Put everything you've got into the prayer, and confidently expect God to answer you.

This seems almost foolproof. God will answer your sincere, heartfelt prayers. He hears you and will guide you.

However, this method is dependent on your own inner discernment. Do you really hear God's voice? How can you be sure? Religious fanatics of all faiths have done some evil deeds while under the influence of their fervent praying.

The question is whether or not you are righteous when you pray. Righteousness is following God, so we're right back where we started—how do you follow God's guidance?

In the next issue of *continuous conversion* (July 2009), I'll consider more methods of seeking guidance:

From within:

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

From without:

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

