

Discerning the Will Of God

HAVING MADE THE FOREGOING DISTINCTIONS in regard to the will of God, we may inquire now whether it can be discerned by us and how. My mental picture for you is that of a man lost in a wood. We need not decide whether it is his own fault that he is lost, or whether he has been misdirected, or whether he has been the victim of some accident. He is asking a question which has often been on people's lips lately: "Where do I go from here?" He feels that there must be a path which is the path of God's will for him in those circumstances, but how can he be sure it is God's way, and how can he be certain that he won't make a mistake?

Let me answer the last question first. To be quite honest he cannot be *certain* until he gets to the end that he won't make a mistake, for he must travel by faith more than by sight. But if he is willing to read the signposts and follow them, he will come out to the place where God wants him to be; and, fortunately, God deals with us where we are. There is an amusing story of a motorist who leaned out of his car

DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

and asked a yokel the way to York. The yokel replied, "Well, sir, if I were going to York, I shouldn't start from here." Fortunately God can start with us where we are, and he has ways of showing us the path of his will.

I am quite sure that the greatest help available in discerning the will of God is reached when we deepen our friendship with him. Those who know God are the quickest and surest at discerning his will. Sometimes you will hear men and women in conference discussing a gift which they wish to make to an absent member. Then perhaps someone will say, "Well, I have known him for fifty years. I know what he would like us to do"; and I think, generally speaking, the authority is recognized. Sometimes in interpreting a dead man's will we hear someone say, "I know what he would have liked best"; and knowledge and friendship and love become a qualification for deciding what would be the wishes of the person concerned.

Surely it was the friendship Jesus had with God—if we may call it by so simple a word—that made him so utterly certain at every twist and turn of the tortuous road he trod as to which direction was the will of God. He *almost* lost his way in the Garden; the night was very dark. It was hard to find the way; but, kneeling there in agony of mind, with his magic key—"Nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt"—he opened the door that led to death, believing that in those circumstances he must take the path of the Cross.

THE WILL OF GOD

BUT, friendship apart, there are numerous signposts which give us some direction, and I would like to speak of them briefly.

1. Conscience may be of lowly origin. Some people think it is a kind of group wisdom gathered through the ages as men found out that some ways of living led to a precipice, and some to a dead end, and some were truly thoroughfares. I know that much scorn can be poured on this lowly voice within our hearts. Men have done evil believing that they followed the dictates of conscience. The voice is distorted by the spiritual level the race has reached and depends on the sensibility of the one who responds to it. Even men of the same generation differ here. One can do things without a qualm of conscience, while another, doing the same thing, would bring himself into a torment of remorse, and it may not necessarily be that either is justified by the facts. For years slavery was uncondemned by the consciences of men, and centuries ahead it will be incredible that our consciences could sleep about slums and war. But when all this has been said, we all recognize a voice that says, "This is right; that is wrong," and that the path of God's will is the former.

2. Then there is the lowly signpost we call "common sense." "I prayed for advice," said a man once, "but nothing happened, and I got no answer to my prayers; so I used my common sense." But who gave him his common sense, and why was it given? If God has placed the machinery for making a judgment within the mind of man, why should he not use it, and why should man regard some uncanny way of

DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

receiving direction as more likely to be divine because it is unusual? Surely insight based on a thoughtful appreciation of the situation is more reliable than impulse. At the same time a warning must be uttered, in that sometimes the direction of the will of God is the opposite of that which common sense would dictate. The will of God is sometimes what the world would call "madness."

3. Let us not disregard the value of the advice of a friend. I do not mean the counsel of a professional minister or consultant, but talking over one's difficulties with a wise friend who, because he can see the matter from a different angle, can view the pros and cons dispassionately and, because he is outside the emotional setting of the problem, can often give us the most helpful advice. Of course there are some problems where God's best way of helping us is through the advice of the expert. In a difficult medical or psychological situation we may not have enough knowledge to obtain the maximum wisdom without the expert who has made the field of our particular difficulty his own special study. But here again let us think of the adviser as an instrument God can use, just as he can use our own judgment. Remember two quotations from Browning:

Hush, I pray you!
What if this friend happen to be—God?

and again:

God teaches us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out.

Get a friend with Christian insight to lend you his mind in your problem, and God will direct you. I don't mean to imply a necessary identification of what the friend advises with what God wills, but a new angle on your problem will help you to see the latter more clearly.

4. There is another way of using the minds and wisdom of others. We reach it as we read great literature, especially biography and history. Again and again it has been to me of inexpressible comfort to read the biographies of great men. Very few problems there are in our lives which great men and women have not had to face before us; and when we read the Bible, which is a library of every kind of literature, but literature all written from a unique point of view—that of the will and purposes of God—then perhaps most clearly of all are we allowed to share in the guidance which God gives his children as they seek to discern his will.

5. Not enough is made, I feel, of the voice of the Church. Jesus once strongly recommended to people to consult the Church. (Matt. 18:17.) I feel that it is not too strong a thing to say that no church is functioning as it ought to do unless there are fellowship groups in it to which the puzzled member may bring his own problem. He may, indeed, disguise it, saying, "I know a man who . . .," when the man is himself. But I can say from experience at the City Temple that sometimes direction to a troubled soul who seeks to discern the will of God has come with crystal clearness when a group of detached, thoughtful, loving Christian

people has been asked what the mind of God is, and what the will of God is, in a certain situation laid before it.

6. Our Quaker friends make much of what they call "Inner Light," and I entirely support the claims they make. They say that God can speak directly to the human soul and show his will to those who seek him. This is undoubtedly true. I would utter only one word of caution. To follow the practice of the Oxford Groups, to endeavor to blank the mind and then take whatever comes into that mind as the will of God, is fraught with a great danger. We are liable to fall into the fallacy of supposing that the method by which we receive this "light" makes it divine, but the thought or impulse that comes to the blank mind is just as much the fruit of earlier mental processes as is, for instance, the thought that comes to the mind after a long argument. Actually one cannot blank the mind or disengage it at any point from all that has gone before. It is as impossible as isolating a wave of the sea and supposing that it has no relation to the waves behind it and the waves before it. Yet if the method is used with wisdom and caution, and if what "comes" in the quiet time is tested by some other ways indicated above or, as the Groupers say, "checked up" with others, no one who knows the facts would deny that God's will is often discerned in this way.

In these ways, then, the will of God, at the point at which we need help may be discerned. Let me underline that last phrase—*at the point at which we need help*. Sometimes I have made

THE WILL OF GOD

a mistake myself by trying to discern the will of God for years ahead. I have come to the conclusion that God does not encourage us to see too far ahead. One simply must accept the fact that one has no idea where the road one is treading is going to lead. Suffice it to say that when one gets to the crossroads one will know which way to turn, and although we like to think that it is terribly important not to make a mistake—and I repeat one can never be certain that one has not made a mistake—yet I adhere earnestly to the view expressed in the section on the ultimate will of God. Our mistakes, if made in good faith, will not result in our being lost. "We shall not miss our providential way." God often wonderfully weaves mistakes into his plan, as he also weaves our sufferings and our sins.

Let me end this section, however, with two challenging questions which I put to myself and would pass on to you.

1. Do I really want to discern God's will, or do I want to get his sanction for my own? An amusing story is told of a minister who was invited to a church at which the salary was four times what he was already receiving; and, being a devout man, he spent many hours in prayer seeking to discern the will of God. One day a friend met the minister's little boy in the street and said, "Well, what is your father going to do?"

"Well," said the little boy, "Father's praying, but Mother's packing."

The father was saying to God, "What wilt thou have me to do?" and the mother, no less good-intentioned, was saying to God, "This is

DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

what I am going to do. I hope you will approve."

Discerning the will of God does really mean putting ourselves out of the picture—not choosing a way as his because it is unpleasant (we have dealt already with that fallacy), but certainly not going to the other extreme and saying, "This is what I am going to do. Please approve, because I want so badly to do it."

2. The second challenging question is this: Have I got the courage to do God's will when I discern it? Many people ask a great many questions as to how they may find the will of God, and every minister knows what it is to sit down with an inquiring person in order to find out the answer to the question. But most ministers have also had experience of those people who, seeing clearly the will of God, say, "No, anything but that." It is only because I see this weakness in myself that I would pass on to others the warning that usually what one needs is not discernment but grit. For myself, more than I need discernment I need fortitude, courage, faith, determination, and perseverance. Not to see, merely, but to do. As Drinkwater puts it:

Knowledge we ask not—knowledge Thou
hast lent,
But, Lord, the will—there lies our bitter
need,
Give us to build above the deep intent
The deed, the deed.