

resource sheet 1

guidance

The subject of God's guidance is an important one, for the greatest concern of a Christian must be to do the will of his or her heavenly Father. While speakers and writers have, quite correctly, laid great stress on the fact that God has his purposes for us, Christian people have not always been very realistic about the practical and theological questions raised by seeking to follow God's will. Sometimes, our approach to this subject has led either to neurotic Christians, afraid to take action unless they hear a voice from the sky, or else to complacent Christians, sitting back smugly comfortable in the knowledge that they are where God wants them. A biblical approach to guidance avoids both these extremes.

Biblical principles

1 A framework for guidance

a) *Personal holiness*

The basic Christian calling is to be God's people and to live the lifestyle that goes with that calling (e.g. Mark 1:17; Ephesians 2:10; 4:1; Philipians

1:27; Colossians 2:6; 1 Peter 2:9). Obedience to God is crucial to this (John 14:21, 23). Becoming a Christian is the start of a lifelong process of becoming like Jesus, and so growth in holiness ought to be our number one priority. This framework alone provides the proper setting for thinking about guidance and can hardly be overstressed. If true God-likeness is our priority we shall avoid complacency.

b) *God's overall purposes*

We each need to see ourselves as part of God's purposes as they run through time and also as part of his purposes in the Church across the world. We should avoid excessive individualism. For example, when God called Moses to serve him as a leader it was principally because God was doing something with his people, rather than simply for Moses' own benefit (Exodus 3:7-10).

2 God's specific purposes for our lives

Consider great men and women of the Bible and how God led and used them. In some, special emphases come

out, for example, Abraham and Mary, the mother of Jesus, (obedience in faith), Joseph (led through suffering), Moses (obedience after reluctance). You may like to add others to this list.

For some Christians God's calling is to be leaders of his people, but in fact all of us need consciously to follow his guidance, whether or not he calls us to leadership. The very direct way the examples above received God's guidance is not the only or indeed the most usual way people are guided. Nehemiah provides a good example of more 'ordinary' forms of guidance (consider the different factors God used in guiding Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1:1-2:8).

3 God's will is good

As the holy God, his will is morally good; he never wants what is morally wrong. He also wants what is for our own good, for he is a loving Father. If we take this seriously, it shows what is wrong with an approach to guidance that sees God as deliberately out to overturn our own hopes and desires, acting almost

guidance

as a cosmic sadist who is determined to find the thing for us to do that we would hate most.

Look up Jeremiah 29:11 and Isaiah 48:17 as examples of God wanting

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the best for his people. Notice also in Romans 12:2 that the more we are transformed by God's work in us, the more we will be in tune with his will, and therefore the less need there will be for him to overturn our own desires. On the other hand, remember there may be times when for one reason or another he does have to step in to discipline us (see Hebrews 12:5-11).

4 God's promises of guidance

Most biblical promises about guidance are of guidance into the ways of righteousness (e.g. Psalms 23:3, 25:4-5, 32:8-9, Proverbs 3:5-7). In other words, they show God's concern is much more with the kind of people we are than our geographical location, marriage partner, employment or other 'vocational' questions. (Incidentally, notice the balance in Scripture – Psalm 32 implies that we should use our minds, while Proverbs urges us not to rely on our minds.) Classic texts like Proverbs 3:5-6 have often been taken out of context. They are primarily about moral guidance (hence the stress on personal holiness above in 1a) and only secondarily (if at all) about guidance concerning career, marriage partner and so forth.

Yet Christian experience does show that God 'directs our paths' in the particular directions he has for us as individuals. However, God does not usually give us a blazing headlight that shows the path miles ahead, but a light to our feet showing the next step or two (see Psalm 119:105). God seldom reveals things far ahead of the need. Indeed it is often only as we are in the middle of perplexities that the way ahead begins to come clear. If you go through a period when it is desperately difficult to see the way ahead, do not feel that God has let you down. Rather it can be a way in which he teaches you to handle decisions and so leads you to greater Christian maturity. Nehemiah felt 'very much afraid' in the midst of God guiding him (Nehemiah 2:2).

Practical indicators

1 Preliminary points

Prayer is essential: yet how easily it is squeezed out. Many find it helpful to set aside specific times for prayer for God's leading. Keeping a notebook and writing down things that happen and ways in which God seems to be speaking is another way of seeing how a sense of call develops over time.

In all this, giving things time is essential. When God called Nehemiah, it was four months from his praying about the subject, to God opening the way for him to act (Nehemiah 1:1, 2:1). The norm seems to be that God gives a sense of call and then there is a period of waiting and growing before the way opens to carry out the call. Therefore, impatience is a barrier to receiving God's guidance.

We must avoid being over-subjective: 'I feel led' is a dangerous phrase

without other grounds for believing that God is leading in the particular way. Likewise, we must realise that a need (on its own) does not constitute a call to us to respond. Nevertheless, we ought to have a deep concern and 'burden' for this world in all its need, for God may guide us through a burden growing in us for some particular need (see Nehemiah 1:1-4).

2 Guiding factors

God speaks to his people in a variety of ways, and we need to be open to hearing his voice through the whole range of possibilities. God's norm seems to be to speak through several different methods about his call to us, and we should look for this 'convergence' of a number of factors pointing the same way in seeking God's will. When this comes, we may move forward in faith, trusting in God's leading.

a) *The Bible*

Being the Word of God, this is the basic element of guidance and we should ensure we use it aright so that through it God can guide us in his ways. While it will seldom guide us into one career rather than another, Scripture is given to us to shape our whole way of living. Regular reading of the Bible is of great importance. As we do so we store up in our minds what God's ways are (and what they are not) and they become part of us. Jim Packer wisely comments:

'...the fundamental mode whereby our rational Creator guides his rational creatures is by rational understanding and application of his written Word. This mode of guidance is fundamental, because it limits the area within which "vocational" guidance is needed and given, and also because only those who have attuned themselves to it, so that their basic attitudes are right, are likely to be able to recognise "vocational" guidance when it comes.' (*Knowing God*, chapter 20.)

Of course, there are also those times when, as we are prayerfully reading the Bible, God gives light and understanding and we are aware he is speaking to us about a particular situation.

b) A settled inner conviction

In the ordination service those to be ordained are asked, 'Do you believe that God is calling you to this ministry?' This is not a feeling we manufacture but a conviction which God produces in us, an ongoing sense of God's leading. Again, time is important in this. However, this conviction may only grow as a person starts to make positive moves to see if he or she is called to ordained or licensed ministry, or other areas of Christian service.

c) Motives

What attracts you to the 'official' ministry of the church? Escape from the difficulties of living and working in a secular environment? The desire to dominate? Or is it a desire to serve? It is crucial to sort your motives out as far as you are able, and to weigh the cost of ministry carefully, to yourself and to those close to you.

d) Gifts

Do you see in yourself, and do others see in you, at least the signs of gifts developing that will be needed in future ministry? You will still feel inadequate (consider Moses, Exodus 3:11 and Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1:6), but God usually takes, uses and develops the gifts we already have.

But what gifts are needed in Christian ministry? In general, gifts in communication (preaching, teaching, group work, personal evangelism, etc.) in pastoral care (a real love for people and ability to relate to them) and in leadership. Remember however – no one has all the gifts.

e) Prophecy

A word of prophecy or knowledge can be used by God to make his purposes clear (see Acts 13:1-3 for an example). While this can seem more specific than other factors, we should avoid the danger of regarding it as an infallible hot-line from God to us. It must be tested by Scripture and by the church leaders, as we can see in Acts 13:1-3 (where the word spoken was accepted) and Acts 21:10-14 (where the word spoken was rejected).

f) Advice

Consider Proverbs 12:15; 19:20. It is important to seek advice from Christian friends, from work colleagues, and especially from your vicar (who has a key role if you do decide to offer yourself for ordination or lay ministry). The advice of a Bishops' Advisory Panel, organised by the Ministry Division of the Archbishops' Council, is, of course, also crucial and is the formal way of putting the role of the church in God's call in Acts 6:1-7 and 13:1-3 into operation. Seeking God's will together reminds us that guidance is more often than not as much a corporate task as an individual's.

g) Circumstances

God can use our family situation, timing and other 'circumstantial' things to guide us. It is obviously important if you are married or engaged that your partner is with you in what you believe God is calling you to do. Similarly, physical and psychological health are important in any call to Christian ministry, as is the ability to make and maintain relationships with a variety of kinds of people.

Considerable discernment is needed in deciding whether a 'closed door'

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guidance

has been shut by God, or is to be pushed open. For example, being not recommended for training at a Bishops' Advisory Panel may be God's way of saying 'not yet', rather than 'no'. Similarly, we are not necessarily meant to go through every open door that faces us. If a door is finally closed to us, we need to realise that this is a sign of God's love: it means that he will open the way to something better.

Further reading

Your Guide to Guidance, Martin and Elizabeth Goldsmith, (a revised edition of *Finding Your Way*) (IVP). Wise advice from a couple who served overseas, lectured at a Bible college, and now travel and teach full-time.

The Last Word on Guidance, Philip D Jensen and Tony Payne, (St Matthias Press). What the Bible teaches about guidance.

The Silver Chair, C S Lewis, (Fount). One of the Narnia stories, which provides a brilliant worked example of guidance in practice.

Decisions, Decisions... Lawrence and Diana Osborn, (IVP). Especially good on the 'corporate' aspect of guidance in chapter 8: Guidance and the Community.

Knowing God, J I Packer, (Hodder & Stoughton), chapter 20. Excellent on the importance of the basic framework of holiness of life and obedience to Scripture in which God guides us.

Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help your Church Grow, C Peter Wagner, (Regal). A very helpful book on the question of identifying your gifts.

The Fight, John White, (IVP), chapter 8. Pithy, provocative and biblical.

In Search of Guidance: developing a conversational relationship with God, Dallas Willard, (Zondervan). Commended by Richard Foster in his *Celebration of Discipline* as one of the finest books on the personal side of guidance.

When the Church Says 'No', Helen Thorp, (Grove Books P98). A helpful exploration of being not recommended and other 'rejection' experiences.

resource sheets

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|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1 Guidance | 7 On being not recommended for training | 13 Infant baptism |
| 2 What kind of people? | 8 Non-stipendiary ministry/OLM | 14 Theological training |
| 3 Women and ministry | 9 Ministers in secular employment | 15 Pre-training reading |
| 4 Calling for all? | 10 Church Army: pioneering evangelists | 16 Grants for training |
| 5 Able and willing | 11 Readers in the Church of England | 17 Fostering vocation |
| 6 What do Bishops' Advisers look for? | 12 Church of England: obstacle or opportunity? | 18 Situations vacant |
| | | 19 Ordained pioneer ministry |

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