

How Do We Get Guidance?

Pastor. Andy, you and Jane looked so worried when I saw you at the weekend that I thought I should call and see if I can help in some way. What's wrong?

Andy. It's good of you to call, and we're very grateful for your interest. As a matter of fact we do have a problem at the moment. It may sound a bit silly to you, but I've been offered a new job and Jane and I just can't make up our minds whether or not I should go for it.

Pastor. Well, congratulations. Many people would like to be in your position. So, what's the problem?

Andy. Oh, it's a good offer all right. It's the first break I've had and it means more money, longer holidays, a better pension and a few other perks as well.

Pastor. Sounds good. So where's the catch?

Jane. I can answer that! Andy will have to work longer hours; he will be away from home more, including some weekends, and there's likely to be a lot of aggro with his new responsibilities. I don't care about the money, I just want a husband who comes home at a reasonable time in the evening, isn't worn out with work and worry, and doesn't have a heart attack at twenty-six.

Andy. Come off it Jane, it's not that bad. Besides, I don't want to be doing my present job all my life, and this is the first opportunity I've had to break out. Anyway, we don't know too much about the new job yet.

Jane. I know, and I want the best for you; but I'm just worried about what it involves, that's all. If only God would write the answer on the wall, then I would go along with whatever he wanted.

Andy. The only time God ever did that was at a drunken party recorded in the book of Daniel, and look what happened to Belshazzar! He lost everything. Anyway, I don't want anyone writing on our wall, we've only just decorated the lounge!

Jane. All right, but can't God tell us what to do in some other way? A way so clear and simple that we could not mistake what he is saying? In the New Testament church, God sometimes gave instructions through dreams or visions. I wish he did that today.

Andy. Some Christians think he still does. I agree Jane that a dream or vision, or something like that, would solve our problem. On one occasion, the early Christians even drew lots to decide who should take the place of Judas as an apostle.

Jane. That's an idea! Perhaps we should try it. Short straw you take the job, long straw you don't. What do you think Pastor?

Pastor. Oh, I wondered when I might get into this discussion!

Jane. Sorry, but you can see how wound-up we are on this issue. Andy has to make a decision during the next week. So, how do we get guidance?

Pastor. I'm glad you put the question like that Jane, because I haven't come here to tell you what to do; I would rather spend some time discussing how we get guidance or, to put it a better way, how God leads and directs us.

Andy. On the other hand, it would be good if you could just tell us what we should do. Think of the time and worry it would save.

Pastor. Maybe, but I might get the answer wrong, and even if I didn't, you wouldn't learn anything about discovering God's will for the next time a decision has to be made.

Andy. So, where do we start?

Pastor. I think you've already started. Jane was talking about dreams and visions just now, so let's continue with that for a while. You were obviously thinking about some of the instances in the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts is the story of the infant church, and the whole book covers about thirty years of its history; by comparing the Acts with the New Testament letters we can discover God's developing plan for his church. It's very important to do that.

Jane. What do you mean?

Pastor. Let me illustrate what I mean from that story of the disciples casting lots to discover whether Joseph or Matthias should take the place of Judas. That seems an easy way to get guidance; at least you joked with Andy about solving your problem in that way. So, why don't we still cast lots, or throw dice, to make all our decisions?

Jane. I suppose because that was the only instance throughout the New Testament of casting lots . . .

Andy. . . . and it was before the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.

Jane. So we assume it wasn't something commonly practised among the early Christians.

Pastor. Right. In other words you look at God's developing plan through the New Testament. Then you rightly conclude that since there is no other example of casting lots, and since none of the letters of the apostles teach us anything about it, it can't be the normal way by which God expects us to discover his will. It isn't sinful or wrong, but it isn't God's best plan for us - for reasons we'll discuss in a minute.

Jane. What about dreams and visions then? There are more examples of those aren't there?

Pastor. Yes Jane, but not as many as you may think. In the whole of Acts there is just one promise of dreams and six accounts of visions or dreams. In the New Testament letters there is only one significant reference to a vision, and that was given to Paul. He mentions it in 2 Corinthians 12:1, and three verses later has said everything he wants to about it. In all Paul's letters, there is not one description, nor a word of advice, counsel or encouragement regarding dreams and visions. The subject is not even mentioned in the discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. The same goes for the letters of Peter, James and Jude. John, of course, had his visions that are recorded in the book of Revelation; but I'm sure you agree that was special. Nothing like it is recorded anywhere else. Why do you think there is this difference between a few examples in Acts, and the almost total silence of the rest of the New Testament?

Andy. By giving us just a few examples God tells us that he reserves the right to use these methods, but by giving us no instructions in the letters, he makes it clear this is not his normal way of communicating with his people.

Jane. Perhaps these were special gifts for the church in its infancy, because the Christians had little else to guide them.

Pastor. I think you're both right; and remember also that interpreting dreams and visions can be a very risky business. The devil can give these things as well, and our mind can play tricks with us.

Andy. Even our supper can play havoc with our dreams!

Jane. Andy, this is supposed to be a serious discussion.

Pastor. No Jane, Andy is quite right. Over-eating, or hyper-activity can both affect our dreams. One reason why God clearly phased-down dreams and visions for guidance is that there are too many counterfeits, and therefore they are too unreliable. But the way, having said earlier that there are only six accounts of visions or dreams in Acts, I should add that there are three or four occasions when we are told simply, that the Holy Spirit spoke. In Acts 8:29, 'The Holy Spirit told Philip: "Go to that chariot and stay near it."' In Acts 13:2, 'The Holy Spirit said: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul."' Then in Acts 16:6-9, Paul and his friends were 'kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the Word in the province of Asia' and 'The Holy Spirit would not allow them to enter Bithynia.' Just how the Holy Spirit spoke on these occasions we are not told.

Jane. Except that in Acts 13, it was probably through the word of a prophet.

Pastor. Quite likely, although the record doesn't actually say that. They could all be examples of a word of knowledge, or a prophecy, or a direct voice, or just a strong impression given to the Christians. As the Bible doesn't tell us exactly, we are not allowed to make a ministry out of guesswork.

Andy. But we do agree that God can use these special ways of revelation if he wants to, although, if the New Testament is our guide, we will expect him to use them only occasionally.

Pastor. That's right, so it must mean that he has a better way to lead us.

Jane. I think I know what that is. The Holy Spirit convinces our mind and conscience that a particular action is right or wrong. Perhaps when we read that the Holy Spirit told Philip to go to the chariot, Philip just had a strong conviction that that is what he should do. In Galatians 5:25, Paul encourages us to 'keep in step with the Spirit', and perhaps that means we must learn to be sensitive to the impressions the Spirit creates in our minds. We talk about having a 'deep conviction' that we should do something; or we say we were 'constrained by the Spirit'. After all, somewhere Paul says we have the mind of Christ doesn't he? I think that must mean we should learn to listen to the silent voice of the Holy Spirit within us, telling us what God's will is.

Andy. Steady Jane, that was nearly a sermon!

Pastor. It was also a fair example of evangelical mysticism.

Jane. I don't follow you.

Pastor. What I mean is that there is something far more important that we haven't yet touched on. If all you are looking for is some kind of impression or conviction from the Holy Spirit, then just as dreams and visions are rare because they are easy to counterfeit, these inner inspirations or feelings you refer to are the most unreliable.

Jane. Why do you say that?

Pastor. Because, unless they are controlled by something more firm than my feelings, I can never be sure how much is from God and how much is prompted by my own inclination or desire. Personally, I have sometimes had great peace about something that later proved to be the wrong course of action. For a Christian to spend his or her life interpreting convictions or circumstances and relying on feelings or impressions is a very dangerous way of living.

Jane. So what is this more important thing that I overlooked?

Andy. I know what you are driving at. The only reliable way to find God's will is to have a thorough knowledge of God's Word, the Bible.

Pastor. Why do you think that's important Andy?

Andy. I remember in one of our conversations recently, you said that the Bible is vital for the healthy life of the Christian, because, according to Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16, it is 'God-breathed', and because in the next verse the apostle tells us its purpose is so that the Christian may be 'thoroughly equipped for every good work.' You said that word 'thoroughly' meant completely or sufficiently. So, if the Bible can sufficiently equip us for every good work, I don't suppose we can find a better way of guidance.

Jane. But the Bible can't tell us what job Andy should take can it? So how can we say it is sufficient?

Pastor. You are running ahead of us Jane. We'll come to that point shortly, but let's just stay with the importance of the Bible for a moment. An often misquoted verse in the Old Testament is Proverbs 29:18. Some of the older translations read 'where there is no vision the people perish', but that verse is not about vision, or visions, it is about revelation. The whole verse reads more accurately in a modern translation, 'Where there is no revelation the people cast off restraint, but blessed is he who keeps the law.'

Jane. So the law of God is seen as the revelation of God, and it's this that guides us, not visions or inclinations.

Pastor. That's right. I think the prophet Isaiah caught the spirit not only of his own age, but of ours as well when he declared in Isaiah 8:19, 'When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people enquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?' Then Isaiah added very significantly: 'To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word they have no light of dawn.' You see, the Old Testament placed its emphasis upon God's verbal revelation. That's what should guide us, and that's how we discover God's will.

Andy. So the wise starting place for guidance is to read and study the Bible.

Pastor. Yes, but here's something you may not have thought about. Probably one reason why Christians have problems with the matter of guidance is that the New Testament has very little to say about it.

Jane. You're joking! Surely the word 'guidance' must be in the New Testament.

Pastor. I didn't say the word is not there, all I said was that the New Testament doesn't deal with the subject of guidance very much. As a matter of fact, Jane, the word for guidance is rarely used. Our Lord used it when he spoke of guiding the blind, and he also promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth, so that they could give us the New Testament Scriptures. The only other use of the word is when the Ethiopian said to Philip, 'How can I understand Scripture unless someone guides me?'

Jane. Is that all? I thought it would be a common word in the New Testament.

Pastor. No, you see the emphasis in the New Testament is not on guidance, but on growing into maturity; and that means knowing how to use the Word in our daily lives. Here's a good example: in Hebrews 5:12-14 the writer complains that his readers haven't grown very much in their understanding, and they still need to be taught the elementary truths of God's Word all over again. He then tells them that solid food is for the mature, who 'by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.'

Jane. Constant use of what?

Pastor. That's the point, he can only mean constant use of the truths of God's Word.

Andy. In other words, Christian maturity is learning how to apply God's Word to our lives . . .

Jane. . . . and constant use means getting into a habit of applying God's Word to every part of our lives - including decision making.

Andy. The trouble is, this means a lot of hard work. It seems to me that we are saying the Christian must spend time getting to know the Bible well, so that when he has to make a decision, he already knows whatever the Bible has to say on the subject.

Pastor. You're right. God has given us brains and a Bible, and he expects us to use both.

Jane. Christians should have Bible biased brains!

Andy. That's neat!

Pastor. Jane is right. That is why God so rarely uses things like dreams and visions, least of all that writing on the wall you joked about earlier. You see, if God gave most of our guidance like that, we would never grow into maturity and learn to think. Let me illustrate it like this. When you were a baby, your parents made every decision for you. They decided when you go to bed and get up; what you would eat and wear and so on. Gradually they let you make more and more decisions on your own, until eventually you rarely needed their direct advice. However, if they were good and wise parents, they taught you the right principles upon which you could make your decisions. There are people who get well into their twenties or beyond, and they still rely on their parents to make most of their decisions; these people have never grown up. It's just like that with God and his church. At first, he made all the decisions very clearly for them. Gradually, as the church received more and more of the New Testament, God stopped giving direct guidance so that the Christians would learn to use the principles found in the Bible to help them make decisions. This is the way a Christian grows into maturity.

Andy. If I could come at it another way, what you are saying is a bit like me taking my car to the garage. I don't want to know whether the mechanic is good at tinkering around with engines or even dreaming about them. I want to know if he can apply the handbook to the car.

Pastor. A bit like that, yes. But just a moment ago I spoke of using the principles found in the Bible to help us make decisions. That's a very important point. You see, we don't pretend that the Bible gives simple answers to all the decisions we have to make. It won't tell you directly and in a few words whether or not Andy should change his job, but it will guide your thinking when you start to assess the pros and cons. That's what we mean by saying the Bible is sufficient. It is sufficient to give you all the principles you need to work on.

Jane. Can we try that out?

Pastor. In a moment we will, but knowing our Bible well is such an important thing to understand, that I would like to stay with it for a moment.

Andy. Go ahead. We are just a bit impatient to apply all this to our particular problem.

Pastor. I appreciate that, and we'll do so before we finish - that's a promise. But let's just see how best we can learn what the biblical principles are. Where do you think we start?

Andy. I suppose it must be by reading our Bible regularly.

Pastor. Excellent though that is, you may be surprised to know that I would not put it in first place. If you go back to the New Testament you will find very little written about personal Bible reading but a great deal about preachers and teachers.

Jane. Perhaps that's because in the first century, not many people could read anyway.

Pastor. I don't think that is the reason Jane. We don't actually know how many of the early Christians could read; literacy might have been quite high among them. No, the real reason was that God has given to his church the gift of preaching and teaching. In other words there are those who are specially gifted to explain the meaning of the Bible and apply it to everyday life and experience.

Andy. So you would say that the most important way of learning what the Bible says is to listen to those who are called to preach and teach the Bible.

Pastor. Yes I would. I would say to every Christian, go and find a preacher who makes the Bible come alive in today's world, and then listen to him regularly. We hear much about Christian counsellors today, but the best counselling should come from the pulpit.

Jane. Would it help if we take notes of the sermons?

Pastor. Certainly, because that helps you to remember. It would also be valuable if Christians would learn to discuss sermons. I don't mean how well or badly the sermon was preached, but how the subject applies to our lives. In fact, I wish Christians would talk about the Bible more in their general conversation together. Sadly, you often hear Christians discussing their opinions about various issues, without ever considering what the Bible has to say. If only we would get into the habit of 'thinking Bible' when we have to make decisions, then we could save ourselves many problems.

Jane. But you do believe that personal Bible study is a good thing don't you?

Pastor. Of course I do, but the best kind of personal Bible study should be in the context of the kind of preaching we have just been talking about. In this way we learn how to apply the Bible to ourselves.

Jane. So are we ready yet to apply this to our particular problem?

Pastor. Nearly, but there are just a few more general points we ought to think about. It goes without saying, of course, that if you listen to sermons carefully, and read the Bible regularly, you must believe that it is all the Word of God; otherwise when it says something you don't like, you will ignore it. There is one other thing that is just as important as believing the Bible to be God's Word.

Jane. What's that?

Pastor. You must obey it. If your life is not obedient to the clear instructions of Scripture, then you will not hear God speaking through his Word when you need special directions. Zechariah 7:13 is one of the most challenging verses in the Old Testament. Have you got it there Andy?

Andy. "'When I called, they did not listen; so when they called I would not listen," says the Lord Almighty.'

Pastor. A sobering thought isn't it? We can never expect God to guide us if we are not doing what he is already telling us to do.

Andy. So, we must believe the Bible, study the Bible, and obey the Bible. What else?

Pastor. Let me pick out a few ways in which Christians sometimes try to get their guidance; ways you need to beware of. We have already referred to Heavenly-vision guidance. This includes dreams and so on, which God can use, but he doesn't often, for the reasons we have already given. Of course, there is no reason why we should not discuss our problem with a few wise Christian friends; they can often shed some helpful light on the issue. But I would stress, a few friends. Please don't go in for what I call Quality Street guidance.

Jane. What's that?

Pastor. You know how you dip into a box of chocolates and you intend to take the first one that you get hold of; but when it comes out you decide you don't like the long, thin toffee finger wrapped in gold foil, so you take another one a random - and so it goes on until you find one you like!

Andy. You mean, sometimes we can keep on asking people's advice until we hear what we want to hear?

Pastor. That's right. Never fall for Promise-box guidance either. Have you ever seen those little boxes full of comforting verses of Scripture written on tubes of rolled paper? You just pick out one and take it as your verse for the day.

Andy. Can't say that I've met that.

Pastor. I'm glad you haven't. That's no way to study the Bible, yet some Christians try to get guidance in a similar way just by opening their Bible at random and looking for a verse. The Bible isn't a box of magic, it's a book of instruction. Did you ever pass an exam by only reading the first sentence that caught your eye when you opened your text book at random?

Jane. No, but then I never passed many exams anyway.

Andy. We're crying for you Jane! What's next pastor?

Pastor. There's what I call Tinker-tailor guidance. That's the kind of approach where you plan to make your decision entirely according to the way circumstances fall out. You say: 'Lord, whatever job I see first I'll go for' or, 'If this happens Lord, then I'll do such and such.' Just like children who push their cherry stones round the plate chanting, 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor. . .' to see what their future will be.

Jane. But is that kind of guidance always wrong?

Pastor. Yes, if we use it to avoid finding out what the Bible has to say. Some Christians try to get all their guidance this way. Of course we have to take notice of our circumstances, but putting out too many 'fleeces' can be dangerous. We mustn't look for short cuts and easy options. I know I keep saying it, but God wants us to use our brains and *think*. I knew someone who decided on the college he would train at because he found the prospectus in someone's dustbin, and he took that as guidance! Remembering where it was found, he could just as easily have come to the opposite conclusion!

Andy. So, Heavenly-vision guidance, Quality Street guidance, Promise-box guidance, and Tinker-tailor guidance. We must have heard everything now!

Pastor. Not quite! There's Harbour-wall guidance.

Andy. Go on, we'll buy it.

Pastor. Someone has said that it is easier to steer a moving ship, than one that is tied to the harbour wall. So, an important principle in guidance is that God leads those who are ready to be led. The pilot doesn't come on board a ship that will not be sailing for a few weeks. Some Christians think that it is enough just to pray and wait for God to do something. But I advise that if you want a new job, go and apply for some. If you are thinking of training, send off to a few colleges and put in some applications. If you think God may be calling you to overseas Christian work, get some mission magazines and write to a few societies. Don't just stay tied up at the harbour wall. So, remember those five warnings.

Andy. Earlier Jane spoke about 'keeping in step with the Spirit', and she described this as being sensitive to his impressions, and being convicted by him. You called that Christian mysticism - why did you say that?

Pastor. You will recall I commented that Jane was not wrong in what she said, but wrong if that was all she had to say. At that point we had not talked about the importance of knowing our Bible. It is very unwise for Christians to expect impressions from the Holy Spirit to be given to an empty brain! That's what I called mysticism. You can now see that the way the Holy Spirit wants to guide us is, as Jane herself put it, with the Bible biased brains.

Jane. So, 'keeping in step with the Spirit' is being obedient to the Holy Spirit speaking to us through the Scriptures. Mystical-mind guidance could be warning number six.

Pastor. Yes, if you like. You see, if we follow the Holy Spirit's method of leading us, we can rely on him to give us a wise mind. He will give us impressions, convictions, and a peace, but they will always be in line with God's Word. Having the mind of Christ, which is a phrase Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 2:16, means a mind that is captive to the Bible.

Andy. Some people might say that what you are suggesting means we have a closed mind.

Pastor. They would be right! But we would be fooling ourselves if we think that anyone has an open mind. An American rock singer recently joked that some people are so open minded that their brains have leaked out!

Andy. I like that!

Pastor. The point is that anyone with brains will have a mind governed by principles and opinions which they have got from the world around them. The mind of the Christian should be governed by God through his Word. Now, let's look at your problem.

Jane. I thought we would never get there.

Pastor. Well, now we are there how are you going to find an answer?

Andy. First of all, we will pray and ask God to lead us in the right way. But we won't be looking for slick and easy signs or instant answers.

Jane. Then we must check up and be sure we are already being obedient to God, because if he is speaking to us through his Word, and we refuse to listen, then he will have nothing more to say to us.

Andy. After that we must sit down and think, and in our case, talk together about the decision. We must work out all the pros and cons to see if there are any Bible principles that tell us if something is wrong.

Pastor. So far, so good. Can you give some examples of the last point?

Jane. I can! In Ephesians 5:25, the husband is told to love his wife as Christ loved the church, and in 1 Peter 3:7, he is told to be considerate to his wife. If Andy plans to get a job that I just can't cope with because he will be away so much, it may be the wrong job.

Andy. You would think of that.

Pastor. Maybe, but Jane has touched on a very important Bible principle hasn't she? A husband and wife live and work as a team and they should be happy in it together.

Jane. Here's another one. Suppose Andy goes for a job that will bring in lots of money and perks, but it will mean we have to pull out of our involvement in Christian work, how do we square that with Matthew 16:6, 'What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul'? Also, what if he has to work a lot of Sundays in a job that is not really essential?

Andy. But we live in a pagan society, and sometimes we don't have any choice in the matter.

Jane. We do if we already have a job that doesn't involve Sunday work.

Andy. I suppose there's nothing wrong in asking the question: 'Will I enjoy the job?'

Jane. Of course not; that's why we need to find out as much about it as possible. After all, in Colossians 3:23, Paul tells us that whatever we do we should work at it with all our heart, 'as working for the Lord, not for men'. So we ought to try to do a job we think is worthwhile.

Andy. You seem to have all the answers Jane. But what happens if the answers to these questions come out on the right side, but still we are not sure what to do?

Jane. Pass!

Pastor. It's been very interesting to listen to you both. That was a much more constructive conversation than the one we started out with wasn't it? Jane was putting the Bible into action. But I agree that sometimes we do come to a stalemate.

Andy. So, what then?

Pastor. As a general rule I work on the principle of: 'When in doubt, stay where you are'. God led you to where you are, and he must make it clear if he wants you to move.

Jane. You don't rule out the importance of circumstances, and having peace about a course of action, or feeling a conviction about something, do you?

Pastor. Not at all. I have just wanted to stress that you don't end there. Circumstances can be confusing or misleading, and there is a false peace and a

conviction which comes from what I want rather than what God wants. Sometimes it takes a lot of talking and thinking and much honest heart searching before we can decide what we should do. But the more we know what the Bible teaches, the easier most of our decisions will be.

Jane. Does that affect our everyday decisions, like shopping and so on?

Pastor. Very much so. Christians don't have to pray before they drop each item into the supermarket basket, but the Holy Spirit will be reminding the Bible-taught Christian about such things as wise stewardship, greed, being gullible to adverts and so forth.

Andy. I can see some light on my job decision already. I need to ask a few more hard questions about what the job involves, and not just look at the pay and perks. Then, Jane and I will have to sit down and think things through from a Bible view point. Thanks pastor, I still don't know what our decision will be, but I'm much clearer now on how we're going to make it.