

Discerning the Will of God in Ministry

1 Corinthians 16:5-9

BI: Gospel ministry is always a dependent work. Faithful ministers plan for the future but trust God to direct their steps however He wills.

This morning we come to the final section of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and, by God's grace, I hope to complete the book with two final messages. We are now beyond the doctrinal teaching that Paul included in this letter to the church of Corinth, and now he is wrapping things up by taking care of some nitty-gritty house-keeping issues that are very specific and personal in nature.

This passage is almost like listening in on a private conversation that takes place after a public figure finishes a speech and thinks his microphone is off. This is a private conversation between Paul and the leaders of the church of Corinth after a 15 chapter monologue about essential Christian truth and practice. Now they're standing back-stage, as it were, discussing schedule and who is riding in what car, and what time they need to leave, and what route they might take to get to the next engagement. For those of us who are kind of listening in, it sounds like irrelevant chatter. But perhaps there's something here we can learn from.

As I read over the next eight verses it sounded to me like the kind of conversations the elders have about ministry here at Calvary Bible Church. And I just think it might be valuable for the church family to get a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes as the elders of this church seek to be faithful to the Lord in how we lead our church into ministry.

By definition, leadership is about going somewhere. It's about moving people forward in a specific direction. In the church it means discerning the will of God for His people and then leading them to accomplish what He desires. But how do spiritual leaders discern the will of God for a church. And for that matter, how does a husband and wife determine God's will for their family?

Now, I don't for a minute think this passages will address these issues exhaustively. You'll probably leave here with some unresolved questions about discerning God's will. But I do think that by offering us the example of how the apostle Paul determined God's will for his ministry, it provides certain insights that we can learn for ours. Let's begin by reading the passage before us.

Read 1 Corinthians 16:5-12

What can we learn about discerning the will of God for ministry in this text?

I. It is God's will for us to make plans: (5)

1. Paul was a strategic planner. He didn't think he was presuming upon the Lord by making plans for the future. He always had a vision for future ministry. He knew that there was much work to be done for the progress of the gospel throughout the world and he was eager to do his part. So he planned.

2. In fact, I think I know where Paul God is propensity for strategic planning. He got it from God. Think about it. The Triune God is the ultimate strategic planner. And His plans are not some mysterious thing that resides in the secret recesses of His infinite mind. No. He has actually gone to great lengths to lay out his plans in a book. We call that book... does anybody know? The Bible.

3. God's strategic plan begins in the book of Genesis and ends in Revelation. Much of God's strategic plan has been accomplished. But we know from the prophetic books that there is still much to accomplish in God's stated vision for the world.

4. Taking his cues from God Himself, then, Paul engaged in strategic planning. He says (5) "But I will come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia."

5. When Paul wrote this, he was nearing the end of a three-year stay in Ephesus where he had been teaching. Paul's plan, then, was to follow Timothy to Corinth (10) some time later where he intended to spend the winter ministering to the church there. On the way, however, his strategic plan included ministering to the saints in Macedonia first as he passed through.

6. Paul was always making this kind of plans. We know from Romans 15, for example, that he developed a strategic plan for taking the gospel to Spain after spending some time with the brothers in Rome.

7. I think this is instructive for the local church. For many years in ministry the elders of Calvary (including myself) simply felt like our job was simply to feed and protect the flock. The problem was, we really weren't really going anywhere. We didn't have much of a vision for the future of what God could do with this little church. But about seven years ago that changed. We began thinking outside the walls of our little congregation. We began to think, "Maybe we would could plant a church. Maybe we could start a counseling ministry. Maybe we could begin sending missionaries all around the world. Maybe we could become a training ground for young men who want to learn how to pastor a local church." We developed a purpose statement: say it with me, "We exist to proclaim the excellencies of Christ in all thing, to the glory of God in the joy of all peoples."

8. Then we began making specific plans for how to accomplish these goals. In short, we are not the same church we were ten years ago. God has led us to accomplish more for his kingdom than we ever dared to imagine.

9. This is where discerning God's will for ministry (and life) begin. It starts with a Scripture-saturated vision for what might be achieved in the future followed by a strategic plan for getting us there. So first, it is God's will for us to make plans. Second...

II. It is God's will for us to be flexible (6)

1. Read v. 6

2. There are some key terms Paul uses here that reveal his attitude about pursuing the will of God in ministry. Did you catch them? Here they are: “Perhaps”, “or even”, “wherever”, and (7) “I hope.”

3. What we learn here is that Paul fully expected that his plans were not always going to work out as he envisioned them. His understanding of God’s will for him was not always complete or correct. I think we sometimes have the idea that since he was an apostle, God spoke with him directly about everything. That’s just not true. God spoke to Paul primarily the way he speaks to everyone— through His word. For example, God, through the book of James, warned that “Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’” The old term is *Deo volente*; “Lord willing.”

4. Can I just let you in on a secret? The Lord doesn’t personally speak to me or the elders telling us what He wants us to do next in ministry. We know the word of God pretty well and that is our guide. His words is a “lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Psa. 119:105). But the Bible doesn’t gives specifics on every decision we make?

5. So do we know that Lord wants us to build a fellowship hall out here on the property? Well, I confess, we never heard a word from the Lord. We do, however, know that God wants to be as effective in gospel ministry as we can possibly be. And when we look at all our options for the future compared to our present challenges that come with grown, a small building out there to help us advance the cause of Christ in this community seems like something that would please the Lord. So, we lay out a strategic plan to accomplish it and hold it before God in an open hand. “If the Lord wills,” we will build it. And “if the Lord wills” we will send Brent and Keri out to plant a new church. And “if the Lord wills” Damon and Jen Cupp will be on the mission field by September. *Deo volente. Deo volente. Deo volente.*

6. The fact is, Paul’s plans to go to Corinth didn’t work out like he envisioned it at all. He planned to minister in Macedonia and then spend the winter in Corinth on his way to Jerusalem with the offering to help the poor. However, unexpected events forced Paul to revise his plans. By the time we get to 2 Cor. 1, we find that Paul now has a “Plan-B”. Read 2 Cor. 1:15-16

7. Later we discover that “Plan-B” didn’t work out either. Weirsbe points out that “Plan-C” turned out to be “a quick and painful visit to Corinth, after which he returned to Ephesus. He then went to Troas to wait for Titus (who had been sent to Corinth, 2 Cor. 2:12–13; 7:5ff), visited Macedonia, and *then* went to Judea. He did not spend as much time at Corinth as he had hoped or as they had expected.”

8. Now, I’ve got to tell you that seeing this in the apostle Paul’s ministry makes me feel a whole lot better about myself. I mean as a pastor, it can be pretty embarrassing when you stand before the church and announce what we’re going to do only to find out later that God had other plans.

It can give the appearance of not doing our homework, or even vacillating. In fact, that's what some were accusing Paul of. Read 2 Cor. 1:17-18.

9. Yes, to lead is to move forward, but sometimes to lead is to be misunderstood. No leader makes perfect plans unless that leader's name is Jesus. Every good spiritual leader understands what we call The Gumby Doctrine. The Gumby Doctrine simply says, "Be flexible." Understand that God is going to refine, redirect, and sometimes bring your plans to a screeching halt. He gets to do that because He is God!

10. And when our plans don't work out the way we hoped, we are not allowed to be devastated by it. Trusting that God is sovereign over all things, we simply roll with it and start moving in a new direction.

11. We had this happen a year or two ago when we planned on having a community event here on the lawn. It was supposed to be a "Meet the Neighbors" kind of event where people in the neighborhood would come together and get to know each other at our expense. We rented bounce houses, bought food, designed, printed, and handed out flyers door-to-door. It was a pretty involved undertaking. But when the day came around for the event to happen, God sent a tornadic thunder storm right through the neighborhood that absolutely drenched everything and blew all our plans!

12. How do you account for that? *Deo volente*. God had other plans. But we don't get discourages or disillusioned. We simply trust God and move forward. And that's what Paul did.

13. So it is God will to make plans, and to be flexible. Third...

III. It is God's Will for us to be Thorough (7-8)

1. Read 7-8

2. While it is true that Paul traveled a lot, it is also true that whenever possible he would stay in one place for extended periods of time. He wasn't just an evangelist. He was a disciple-maker. And disciple-making takes patience. It requires personal involvement in people's lives, and lots of time.

3. Paul had spent 1 1/2 years establishing the church of Corinth. When he wrote this letter he had been in Ephesus for nearly three years and his plan was to return to Corinth and stay for at least 3 or 4 months. It was going to take time to resolve the difficult issues that had arisen since he left. He didn't want simply to drop a message on them, or do a weekend conference and move on. He wanted to invest in this congregation. He wanted to invest personally in the leadership of this troubled church.

4. Paul didn't want to do anything half-way. He was determined to be thorough. And I would just say to you young men who are planning on entering the ministry, plan to stay in one place for a long time. It takes time to shepherd a struggling flock back to health. It will likely take years for you to make a significant impact.

5. One month from today (May 1) will mark our family's 18th year of ministry to Calvary Bible Church. I can't imagine doing it any other way! I can't express the joy that it is to see children who were only a few years old when I came now going off to school, getting married, and living godly lives of their own. So much has happened over the years. Many have come to Christ. Many have repented of life-dominating sin. Some have risen to spiritual leadership, and some have fallen away. And we ourselves have been greatly changed by it all. What a magnificent thing it is to serve in one church for the long haul.

6. If you're going to be thorough, it's going to take time. So don't be in a rush to do things quickly.

IV. It is God's Will for you to Suffer:

1. Read 8-9

2. Paul was a strategic planner who knew all his plans wouldn't work out, that he would have to invest a lot of time, and he expected that along the way he would suffer.

3. Along with great opportunity we know we will face our share of adversaries. As you are pursuing the will of God for your life and ministry there will be people who will intentionally stand in your way to keep you from moving forward. Move forward anyway.

4. Calvary Bible Church is (in my evaluation) a healthy and unified church that is a joy to be a part of. But it wasn't always this way. Frank and Joe can testify to this, that the first 5 1/2 years of Calvary's existence was a daily battle because there were many adversaries. When word got out that two young men who were home-schooling their children had become the pastors of this church, we became a magnet for all kinds of people who wanted to take advantage of the situation. People came with their ideas, their church-growth strategies; their home-school agendas; their pride, ambition. Behind the scenes we adopted the axiom "Light attacks bugs."

5. It was a daily battle that was often fought on several fronts all at the same time. There were occasions when all Pastor Jim and I could do was to literally fall on our faces on the floor of his office pleading for God to save His church and keep us from messing it up.

6. And even after those years, there have been from time to time people who came, it seemed, for no higher purpose than to stir things up and take control if they could. This has always been the testimony of the church. There have always been adversaries. And when Brent and Keri go out to plant a new church in a couple years (*Deo volente*), I guarantee they will have to face some of

these people. There will be adversaries. But that doesn't necessarily mean you have missed the will of God. It may mean that you are making progress in the territory of God's enemy and you need to keep pressing forward no matter how fierce the battle becomes.

7. So, it is God's will to plan, to be flexible, to be thorough, to suffer, and finally...

V. It is God's will for you to be a Team Player (10-12)

1. Read 10-12

2. Listen, not even the apostle Paul could accomplish God's will for the church all by himself. He was a team player. He wasn't out to make a name for himself. He was out to make disciples of Christ. His goal was to train men who would take the truth God had given him and pass it on to others.

3. Timothy and Apollos were two of those men, but there were others. Even in this chapter he mentions Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (17); and Aquila and Prisca (19). In fact, in Romans 16 he works through a long list of people who were his fellow laborers in Christ. Yes, Paul was an apostle, but he was a team player.

4. His role was to train people in the Scriptures and then send them off to pursue God's will for their own ministries in places he could never reach. He didn't try to micro-manage every aspect of the ministry. He believed Christ was at the center of the ministry, not himself. And that's the way it should be. Every believer equipped and set free to do the work of the ministry God has gifted them for.

5. We had such an enjoyable campout this weekend, one of the best we've ever had. And one of the things I enjoyed most is seeing men other than myself take up the key leadership roles and run with them. In fact, the only thing I was asked to do was to pray one time, and that was after two other men had already prayed. And yet the event was well planned for and executed; a couple young men lead worship, a couple of young dads shared their testimonies, and another one brought a message from the word. And I just sat back and smiled.

6. In Seminary prof Howard Hendricks used to say, "Gentlemen, the ultimate test of leadership is how long the leader can be dead in before anyone notices." It is God's will for us to make plans, be flexible, be thorough, endure suffering, and be team players.

7. And this is not just good counsel for church leaders. This is good counsel for moms and dads, single men and women, missionaries, church planters, and everyone else who is seeking to be faithful to accomplish the Lord's will for their lives.

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