

# Guidance

*(The following is the substance of an address given by David Silversides in Castlewellan on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2002.)*

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14)

Our theme is guidance or more fully, guidance from God's word alone. The subject of guidance is one about which there is great confusion in the professedly evangelical and even reformed constituency. Certainly in my own experience from my early days as a Christian, I can remember Christians speaking with great confidence of the Lord guiding them on some particular matter and they spoke with such confidence that their manner left me awestruck, bewildered and feeling decidedly lacking in some way. I think many of us, if we have been in circles which are less than reformed, may have gone through some such experience. Speakers at meetings would speak with great confidence that the Lord guided them to do this and guided them to do that. One is left thinking, "Well, I don't seem to be able to measure up to the kind of confidence in divine guidance that these people seem to have." And one is left perplexed and wondering what exactly is wrong.

## **1. The Whole Duty of Man is to Obey God's Word.**

That may seem a statement of the obvious in a reformed gathering, but sometimes the obvious has to be spelled out so that we understand the repercussions in terms of what is not true, that if this is true, then other things are not true. The whole duty of man is to obey God's word. "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." All that God has said concerning how we are to think, speak and do, this is our obligation to believe and follow. The Scriptures tell us what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man. So the whole duty of man is to obey God's word.

## **2. The Scriptures are Exclusively the Word of God.**

That is basic Reformed and Protestant belief, that the Scriptures are exclusively the word of God. 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." So if we want to know what the Lord requires of us, we must always and without exception turn to the Holy Scriptures. If we desire to know what the Lord requires of us in any particular situation, we are to seek our guidance prayerfully from the Holy Scriptures. That is to say, we reject the idea that divine revelation comes from any other source than Scripture; that is, that the Scriptures are the complete revelation of God in terms of special verbal revelation.

We do not believe that God speaks through the pope or through Joseph Smith or through the Charismatic pseudo-prophet, nor does he speak by way of revelation or inerrant revelation through our own feelings. The Bible alone is the complete revelation of the will of God. We use the term ‘will of God’ here not in the sense of his decreed will but in the sense of his preceptive will, that is, not what God has decreed will happen but what God commands us to do. The term ‘will’ is used in both those senses in the Scriptures. It is used in the sense of what God has decreed will happen, Romans 9:19, “Thou wouldst say then ... who hath resisted his will?” Or in Ephesians 1:11 we’re told that God “worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.” Or James 1:18, “Of his own will begat he us.” There the term ‘will’ is used of God’s decree of what shall come to pass, but the term ‘will’ is also used in the sense of God’s precepts, what he commands men to do. So in Mark 3:35, “For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.” John 7:17, “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.” Or in Matthew 7:21, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”

Now clearly in these passages, the term ‘the will of God’ is not used in the sense of fulfilling what God has decreed men will do because that is true of all men - God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass; but in these verses, a distinction is made between those who do the

will of God and those who do not. So clearly in these passages, the term ‘the will of God’ is used in terms of what God commands, what God tells men to do, not what God has decreed that they will do. It is in that sense that we use the term ‘the will of God’ when we say the Bible alone is the complete revelation of the will of God, the preceptive will of God, what God tells men to believe and to think and to do.

### **3. (a) The Only thing to Avoid in any Situation is Sin.**

Now that is very simple but it is something that is frequently overlooked when the subject of guidance is considered. There is only one thing that we must not do and that is we must not sin. In every decision we have to make in life whether big or small, whether of great importance or whether in a minor matter, there is only this one thing that we must avoid and that is sin, and sin is the transgression of the law. 1 John 3:4 tells us just that, so that means that in every situation where we say we need guidance, what we need is to know how to avoid sinning against God; what course of action does not entail transgression of the law. The law of God summed up in the Ten Commandments is that which we must fulfil in any and every situation or choice or decision that we make. Of course, we can only begin to heartily conform to the law of God through the grace that is in Christ Jesus but there is no perfect will of God for your life or mine, to use the oft quoted kind of language, other than what the written word of God requires of us. Nothing is required of us beyond the commands of God in Holy Scripture. Righteousness and holiness even that which is the fruit of

the work of the Spirit of God, bring us to faith in Christ. That holiness which is found in those who are born of the Spirit and depend upon Christ for acceptance with God, that holiness which is that sanctification which proceeds from union with Christ, is defined in terms of the law of God.

So in the book of Romans 8:3-4 we read, "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Now that tells us that sanctification is one of the benefits Christ purchased for the elect of God and that his bearing of the guilt of sin is the basis on which our bondage to sin is reversed by God's grace because that bondage to sin was itself part of the condemnation of God upon Adam's first transgression and, therefore, Christ's atonement for the sins of his people is the basis on which that bondage to sin is reversed by the mighty working of the Spirit of God in sanctification. That holiness which flows from the work of the Spirit in regeneration and the continuing work of the Spirit in the people of God, is a holiness that is here defined as the righteousness of the law being fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.

So walking after the Spirit is not some mystical vagary, it is not some strange eerie experience, some airy-fairy affair. It is when the Spirit of God enables us through faith in Christ Jesus to heartily keep the commandments of

God. So holiness is to be defined as conformity to the law of God. There is no holiness independently of conformity to the moral law of God. Sometimes we hear such ill-conceived expressions such as, "We need love, not law," but of course, that whole concept is entirely misguided. The law of God commands us to love, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength. This is the great commandment and the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."

So the holiness of the Christian is hearty conformity to the law of God from the inside out, out of gratitude to the Redeemer. There are never any works of supererogation above the commands of God in Holy Scripture. There is no level of following the Lord that is aside from or above or disconnected with conformity to the precepts of the word of God and that includes even such matters, for example, as our duty to the weaker brother. Sometimes it is represented as if when the apostle in 1 Corinthians 10 is saying that we must show consideration for the weaker brother, that this is something over and above the commands of God or the law of God, the moral law but it is nothing of the sort. In 1 Corinthians 10:27 we read this, "If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake. But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof."

Now you might say, there is something the apostle is giving in addition to the requirements of the moral law but this is not so. What the apostle is saying is that that which may be legitimate in terms of the second commandment is not to be used in a manner that is in conflict with the sixth commandment. He is not telling them to do something that is outside the scope of the moral law. He is simply saying that there are some things that may be legitimate in terms of the first table which are illegitimate when used in a manner contrary to the second table. There is no addition to the law of God.

There are, of course, particular callings. There are those called to be married. There are some whose calling is to be single. There are those called to be ministers of the word or elders in the church of God, but these are determined by biblical criteria being applied to the gifts of the individual to reach the right conclusion according to the word of God. They are a specific application of the law of God. They do not require revelation outside of Scripture.

So all we have to avoid in any and every situation is sin which is a transgression of the law. There is nothing to avoid but sin. Now this means, within this point, firstly, those courses of action that are sinful in themselves must always be avoided. When a choice of course of action is to be made, those that are intrinsically sinful according to the word of God, should be excluded from the picture.

### **3. (b) Sin is to be Avoided in the Process of Choosing between Options that are in themselves Lawful.**

Integrity of heart before God is the great essential. The great problem with guidance is that we need divine grace to actually be willing to conform to whatever the word of God requires of us. That is the great difficulty. “Unto the upright, there ariseth light in the darkness” (Psalm 112:4).

So when two or more options are open to us and both are lawful in themselves, there is a biblical priority order of considerations that will determine which is the right option to take. Let us give an example. You are in the happy position that you have been offered two jobs. Neither of those jobs involves sin in itself. Neither of those jobs involves dishonesty, Sabbath breaking, promoting that which is immoral. They are both legitimate jobs. How do you decide which one you should take? Neither of them in the performance of them involves sin so how do you decide? One has a better pay than the other. That is not an illegitimate consideration but it is not the only one. Supposing the job with lower pay means you are within reach of a biblical and reformed church but with the other one that is not the case? Or supposing the lower paying job allows you to fulfil your responsibility in the family context, caring for an aged parent, something like that, but the other one does not? Now the better paid job, as to what would be required of you, is lawful but to allow the extra pay to override all these other considerations? The job is lawful but the thought process by which you choose it would be sinful, would it not? Would it not be a concession to sinful covetousness to let the pay, the money, override all these other considerations? So even when there are two

legitimate jobs on offer both of which in themselves could be performed without sin, yet the process of choosing one over the other can be sinful. So what we must avoid in the process of determining which to take is sin.

If you decide honestly in the light of God's word that you should be married, in deciding whom you would like to marry, if you do not give sufficient priority to the demands of godliness, you may make a marriage that is a lawful marriage as far as the marriage is concerned, it is a real marriage, but the process by which you came to decide whom you should marry may entail sin because the priority order you operated on was not a biblical one. It was therefore a sinful one. So you see that even when legitimate options are in view, we must seek by God's grace to avoid sin in the process by which we determine which of those two things legitimate in themselves we go for.

#### **4. The Lord does Guide Us.**

He has promised to guide his people. He guides the meek in judgment. How does he do it? He does it through enabling us to understand and honestly apply the word of God in its one true meaning. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105). But how does God guide us through his word? By enabling us to understand the one correct meaning that there is of any part of Scripture. Every part of Scripture has only one correct meaning for all of us. There is only one correct interpretation of every part of the word of God.

Turn to Hebrews 11:8, "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went." Those of you who in the past have been to non-reformed missionary conferences may well have heard this verse quoted. You find that someone who has gone to the mission field in distance places will give an account of how they were called, as they say, to missionary service and they will quote this verse and they will say that the Bible opened at this verse, or else that in their normal reading of the Scriptures, they came to this verse, "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went," and they say, "This verse came to me with power and that was my call to the mission field." If we are not instructed well in the faith, we are somewhat in awe of this kind of thing but that verse does not tell anyone to go to the mission field. Not one. It does not tell one single Christian to go overseas to the mission field. It tells every Christian that he or she ought, like Abraham, to obey God, trust in him for the outcome even when what the future holds is uncertain to him or to her. It tells every believer that if need be, we must be willing to leave all that is familiar, all our familiar surroundings for the Lord's sake. Persecution may require leaving that which is familiar, where the situation is such that compromise of the honour of the Lord is required to stay in a particular situation. But it tells no believer whether he is called to be a missionary. To determine whether someone is called to be a missionary is to be done by the

individual and especially by the church, particularly the ministers and other elders of the church, examining that person in the light of the biblical qualifications for a minister of the word and particularly a minister of the word in a missionary situation. So that text does not tell this person, "Go to the mission field." It tells every Christian what they should be willing to do for the honour of the Lord, or as required by the law of God. Every verse has one meaning for every Christian. It is the application of Scripture in its one true sense that is needed.

Now at this point, let us examine some departures from this view. I'd like to read to you an extract from "The Days of the Fathers in Ross-shire," by John Kennedy. He has an appendix on 'the secret of the Lord' where he says this, "It is one extreme statement that God reveals ought to his people apart from the Bible but it is another that he makes known to them only what is there directly revealed. We must not expect to know the mind of God but by means of the written word. The law and the testimony must be our only guide in knowing, our only standard in judging of the things of God. To that light must we repair to examine what is of God and to that rule, to try what professes to be of him. But surely, God does make known to his people what is not directly revealed in his word although he does not do so except by means of what is written." Later on he says, "Thus too by means of the written word does God often reveal to them who fear him the issues to which he will bring their cases when they deal with him by prayer. Applying to their case a word in season, he excites an expectation of such a result

as that word doth indicate and thus his purpose of dealing with them in a particular way is made known. They are thus enabled to anticipate an event in their own spiritual history without receiving any revelation of God's unfulfilled purposes apart from the light of Scripture." Again he says, "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him as to the cases of others for whom they plead. The spirit of prayer may suggest and often does, the case of a particular individual to the mind of one who is pleading at the footstool of mercy. With the suggested case may come a suggested portion of Scripture. In the light of the latter, the former is considered and as thus seen is laid before the Lord. To the case thus presented, the Lord may apply a passage of Scripture to indicate his mind regarding it and to give to the pleader a favourable or unfavourable anticipation of the result. That premonition may be more or less distinct but even when assuring, it is something very different from the inspiration of the prophet. It results entirely from an adaptation by God himself of his own written word." Later on he says, "It is well to mark the difference between the knowledge derived from the direct teaching of the Bible and that which is only indirectly obtained by means of it."

What are we to make of this? How are we to view Dr. Kennedy's view? One hesitates to criticize someone of the stature of Dr. John Kennedy of Dingwall. He was a stalwart defender of orthodox Calvinism. Nonetheless, even the best of men do err and it is our view that Dr. Kennedy was mistaken. Without approving random

dipping into the Bible for the purpose, we readily accept that God in his providence can cause us to come across in our normal Bible reading or indeed can bring to our minds passages of Scripture which in their one true meaning are particularly relevant to our particular situation or to the decision that we have to make. Yes, God in his providence can bring part of his word to our attention in that way and in such a way that those parts of the word in their one correct meaning are relevant to the decision we have to make. That is fine but we deny that God communicates his mind to us by using his word to mean something above and beyond and more specific than its original meaning. What Dr. Kennedy seems to be saying is that because the words are confined to the words of Scripture, God can make those words more specific in their application than the actual meaning of the words originally intended.

We submit that this would still involve giving those words a meaning beyond what they have in themselves and, therefore, this does entail a claim to divine revelation beyond Scripture and is a concession to the Charismatic movement. It is making the words of Scripture have a meaning beyond that which they originally were intended to have when they were breathed out by the Spirit of God. Particular biblical truth brought to our attention in providence, yes, but texts made to mean something different or more than they originally meant, no.

So Romans 10:1, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." Matthew 5:44 tells us to pray even for those who persecute us. No

doubt these texts can act as a spur to our standing duty to pray for our neighbour, even our persecuting neighbour, but their coming to our minds even with great force should not be taken as meaning that we know whether that neighbour is elect or reprobate because we do not. Dr. Kennedy seems to be indicating that we can know in advance of someone manifesting the effects of regeneration; that we can know or have a premonition as to whether God is going to regenerate them, whether they are elect of God. We do not know. We cannot know. Who are elect and reprobate is hidden in the mind of God.

Then there is the place of providence. God reveals his glory, the glory of his attributes, in providence, his most holy, wise and powerful, preserving and governing of all his creatures and all their actions. But providence does not give us specific revelation or propositional truth.

What is the role of providence? Providence limits the options open to us, that is obvious. Providence may draw our attention to aspects of the word of God or aspects of a situation upon which the word of God has to be brought to bear that we had not adequately considered. God in his providence can bring to our attention some scriptural consideration we had overlooked. God in his providence can bring to our attention some aspect of a decision we are endeavouring to make which we had not previously noticed. Providence in that way can cause us to examine a course of action that we have been following or were going to follow, and to reverse it in the light of the word of God. But providence itself does not show us what we should do.

Jonah went to Joppa. He was running away from his duty but there was a ship ready to take him to Tarshish. Did the fact that there was a ship there mean that what he was doing was right? Would it have meant that he could legitimately say, "Providence has opened up the way." Providence might have opened up the way but what he was doing was wrong. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul when he was doing what was right had no end of trouble. In the account of all his afflictions for the Gospel's sake, he could have said, "Well, providence is showing that I am on the wrong track. I am getting nothing but trouble." But he was right. Short-term smoothness is no guarantee that we are on the right track. If what we are doing is not biblical, do not imagine that because it goes well for a time that that makes it right. Only the word of God correctly applied in its one true meaning actually tells us what is right.

What about the place of feelings? Do feelings have any place in Reformed Christianity? Of course they do. There is meant to be a place for emotion in biblical and Reformed Christianity. "Godly sorrow which worketh repentance." "Joy and peace in believing." "Joy unspeakable and full of glory." But the place of feeling, emotion, is in response to truth. It is truth-led, truth-governed, truth-stimulated emotion. That is why it is joy and peace *in believing*, but joy and peace do not define what is to be believed. The word of God tells us what is to be believed and as we believe, there is joy and peace in believing. There is sorrow as the Lord God shows us our sin and as we look upon Christ and trust in him, by the

grace of God, we sorrow. The Christian has distinctive joys and distinctive sorrows that the world knows nothing about. But the truth is what comes first: truth-led, truth-governed emotion.

Our feelings are not the test of truth. Our feelings can be wrong, very wrong, hopelessly wrong. They can be right. Our feelings, though they are not reliable, our gut instincts are not always wrong. They are not always right but they are not always wrong. Our gut instincts can be a reflection of a biblically-informed heart and mind and conscience. Indeed, we should all have biblically-informed, biblically-governed reactions by the grace of God.

So for example, when confronted by temptation, we do not always consciously go through the whole process of thought which tells us that is wrong. If you go into the newsagent and there is filthy material on display, you turn away. You do not necessarily go through a conscious process, "The seventh commandment says thou shalt not commit adultery. Christ expounded that to the very thoughts and intents of the heart. This material is contrary to that, therefore, I turn away." There is a biblically-governed ingrained instinct in the godly. It is capable of analysis later on. But we do not necessarily always go through the conscious stages of a process at the time.

So our gut reactions can be right. When talking one time with a minister on the phone (nowhere in this part of the world) who had a problem and he thought he had a

solution but he did not feel right about it. He left it for a while, thought about it, prayed about it, looked to the Scriptures and the next time I spoke to him, he had worked out from the Scriptures why he had not felt right about his proposed solution. There was a biblical basis for his disquiet. Feelings can reflect a biblically-informed instinct but we always need to examine those misgivings, those feelings in the light of the word of God. If we find that the Scriptures sanctions the course of action about which we had misgivings, then our feelings were wrong. Perhaps they were a reflection of our temperament. Perhaps we were very tired and more inclined to pessimism. Perhaps it was a suggestion of Satan. If there is no biblical reason for our misgivings, then we follow the word and we seek grace to bring our feelings into line with the word of God. Sometimes it works the other way. We suspect something is not right, we cannot just put our finger on it and then when we turn to the word of God we see why it is wrong.

This, perhaps, explains why what is sometimes called ‘women’s instinct’ is not always wrong. Men tend to sometimes in their pride scorn women when they have a feeling about something. Certainly such feelings are not reliable. They could be absolutely meaningless but sometimes they are right. Those of you who have been married a long time, have learned, I am sure, to realize that your wife is sometimes right and that when she says she has misgivings about something, I hope you have learned not to dismiss it as necessarily irrational. Later on

you can find that there was a reason for it which could be pinned down.

Never act on a mere feeling, but sometimes feelings can reflect something that is spotted or noted and later on it can be pinned down in the light of the word of God. Always follow the word of God. Never follow mere feelings but do acknowledge that feelings can reflect a biblical response but go on to pin it down in the word of God. If the feeling is not a reflection of biblical duty or biblical truth, ignore it, but sometimes it can reflect the instinct of a biblically-informed Christian heart and mind.

## **5. What if We Realize we have taken a Wrong Turn?**

Sin is always to be repented of and acknowledged before God who is gracious and of great kindness. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, for we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." If a sinful decision is reversible, then reverse it. That is the fruit of repentance. Zaccheus sought to reverse and more than reverse his dishonesty. But if it is not reversible, do not despair. Sometimes the more mystical views and books on guidance leave you with the feeling that if you make a wrong move, that is it. But that is not true.

Not all sinful decisions are reversible. David's great sins and their effects could not be reversed. Uriah was dead. Sometimes Christians in their folly and in their sin and their pride have been known to marry unbelieving

people. It is still a marriage. It cannot be reversed. Supposing you take the wrong one of the two jobs we mentioned previously? You realize that you conceded to covetousness in letting the money predominate and in brushing aside all other considerations and you should not have done that. You took the job that reflected a covetous heart. You now see that. You repent of it before God by his grace, but the other job is gone. Somebody took it months ago. Does that mean there is no way forward unless that same job opens up again? No, it does not. There is always a biblical way forward. Always. However painful, there is no situation where following the word of God is not the way forward.

In that situation where you greedily went after the higher paid job and you should have gone for the other one, you have got to stay with the job for the moment. You can pray that God in his providence and grace might open up another opportunity so that you can be near a congregation of God's people where biblical and reformed worship takes place, or you can be near that aged relative that you really ought to help and look after. But in the meantime you have got to get on with this job because if a man shall not work, neither shall he eat. The fact that you took it when you should have taken the other one is in God's providence. Even our sins are in the providence of God. That does not excuse them in the slightest but even our sins are in the providence of God. That is the job you have got. It does not involve sinning to do it so you carry on with it until God opens in his providence a way, a better option, but you must earn

your living. That is your duty before God. "Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work." God is never at a loss. I say that reverently. God is never stuck because we cannot reverse back up the wrong way of the one-way street that we came down. Repent of the sin and glorify God by following the word of God from there on.

I do not pretend to have given you all the answers but I am, by God's grace, resolved to tell you where the answers are and they all are in the word of God. This is what I want to say by way of conclusion; all the answers are in the Scriptures. There is no situation in which you or I will ever find ourselves where the word of God is not completely adequate to tell us what our duty before God is. The only thing we must ever avoid is sin. The answers are always in the inscripturated words that have proceeded out of the mouth of God.

One last thing, knowing what we ought to do in itself has never been enough to enable us to do it. I say that by way of closing because it is right that we should see that our duty is defined by the word of God but knowing what we should do is not the same as being able to do it. We all know that. Indeed, in our unregenerate state, the position is that the more we know what God requires, the more hostile we are to doing it. "The commandment came and sin revived and I died." And even if we are Christians, there is still much of indwelling sin and corruption within us.

So with all that I have been saying about determining what our duty is before God, we must understand also,

“Except ye abide in the vine, ye can do naught.” Except by God's grace we are walking in fellowship with the Lord and we see the excellency and the beauty and the glory of the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, and our hearts are drawn out in love to him, we will not love righteousness and hate iniquity. What I have been saying to you about determining what God requires must be kept hand-in-hand with the truth that apart from union with Christ and in fellowship with him, we will not have the power to do it. We depend upon the grace of God at every point. We never naturally love God in the slightest degree nor can we naturally want to do that which is right in his sight. We must seek grace, we must seek the blessing of God, the strengthening of God and seek to be looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, and in that way we will esteem all the Lord's precepts concerning all things to be right.