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Decisive Living

GOD INITIATES—MAN RESPONDS

As we have looked at the various points in our diagram, a fact of great importance has emerged: throughout history, God has always been active, Man reactive. God initiates, Man responds. This is so even at the Fall (Point 2)—Man can rebel only against what God has created. The essence of his 'active' rebellion is in fact reaction against what God has done. Even in his disobedience, Man is not free to stop being a creature. God is the only truly active Person; creatures are always reactive with respect to Him.

This is particularly true when God's rule comes on Man at Point 4 (the Christ event). When we dealt with that great theme, we noticed how Man is almost forced to come to terms with the kingdom of God. Jesus' announcement of the kingdom demands a response. At Point 6 (the Second Coming) we understand he *will* be forced to come to terms with it, if he has not used the amnesty period of Point 5 to repent.

For Christians living at Point 5, this insight about initiative and response has important implications. It means that the correct starting point for living is to ask, not 'What should I

do?’ but, ‘What has God already done?’ The answer to this question will set boundaries to what we attempt to do, for certain areas are God’s spheres of activity, not ours. We are secure only if we recognize where God has already acted on our behalf and do not try to do His work ourselves. We have already explored some of the errors people make in this respect.

God has taken the initiative and set us in relation to Himself. We are His children, recipients of His gift, standing ‘in Christ’, justified before God. The fact that we are at this point *before* we start living has a great impact on everything we do—and especially on our decision-making.

THE GIFT CONTROLS THE TASK

If, as we have seen, the gift enables the task, it is also true that the gift *controls* the task. Our thinking is not primarily controlled by the goals we consider worthwhile but by who we are. Having understood who we are by God’s gift and call, we are to walk worthy of this calling in our practical living (Eph 4:1).

Understanding that we are not goal-centred is a very liberating truth when faced with making decisions. It frees us from thinking we should do things because they are worth doing ‘in themselves’. At any given moment there are myriads of things ‘worth doing’. Is that not the problem of over-choice which constantly plagues us? In actual fact, nothing is worth doing ‘in itself’. All things must be related to God to be worthwhile. And if ‘I’ am to do it, then it must be related to ‘my’ walk with God. Out of relation to Him, it cannot be done faithfully.

(Confusion here has subverted many Christians and churches into meeting ‘needs’ instead of acting obediently out of who they are before God. This is not to deprecate many magnificent works done in Christ’s name, but to point out that Christian activity is often motivated by a desire to meet ‘worthwhile’ needs or goals rather than respond to God’s call to live for Him.)

If we take a 'goal-centred' approach to life, we set up the thing to be done (the task) without relating it to what has already been done by God (the gift). We must ask, 'What has God done, and what is He doing?' before we ask, 'What will we do?'

For the *world*, the goal is the starting point for action. For the *Christian*, the goal is always subservient to the gift, and the gift is the springboard for action. This leads to another contrast: the meaning of life for the world is in the successful achievement of goals, but for the Christian it is simply to serve God and to live as His child. Life's significance does not depend on accomplishment or 'goal-reaching'—an approach which carries with it the inevitable possibility of failure to be the person you set out to be because you fail to reach your goals. We are not to be controlled by 'goals' but by who we are in God's sight.

This commits us to a life of faith. Trusting God because of what He has already done is the basis for finding what He will do now, and that in turn is the basis for discerning what we should do. That is what 'faithful' living has always been about: it is at one and the same time God's work in the world and our own action.

ACTION

1 Be careful how you apply what I have written here. There *are* goals which God sets us, but these are expressions of His relation to us and our relationship to Him. Obedience and faithfulness are matters controlled by the immediate requirement of what God is saying now.

2 If you have been a goal-centred person who has striven to achieve things in life in such a way that they have consumed you—even good things, including truly moral goals—then ask the Lord whether this has hindered your relationship with Him. It is this relationship that we are fundamentally search-

ing for and expressing in life. This is the priority which is vital. We are not goal-centred so much as Person-centred.

THE CALL TO BE DECISIVE

If it is true that man is basically reactive to God, how can he be considered 'decisive'?

The word 'decisive' is used in two different ways today. It may carry the idea of the 'decisive man' who makes many executive decisions—the man who 'makes' things happen. Or it may refer strictly to the process of making up our minds, of 'deciding'. In this sense, it refers to the act of willing, and it is this sense which concerns us here.

At every point in life, God calls us to be faithful to Him—that is, He calls us to *decide* to obey Him. It is vital that we do not opt out of this. The call to be decisive about obeying God makes us very committed to our particular historical moment and place, because that is where our obedience must be lived out. We have already dealt with our 'moment'; we are called to live at Point 5 in the diagram, in the tension of the old and new ages. Now let's concentrate on our place.

If God is calling us to be faithful, the question is: Where, and about what?

Decisive—Where? Paul's answer to this question is simple: we are to be decisively faithful in the place where God's call comes to us.

In 1 Corinthians 7:17–24, in a context where the difficulty of the last days is uppermost in Paul's mind, he argues that 'each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him' (v 20). Where God's call comes to us is no accident; Paul regards it as the place God has 'assigned' (v 17). And he insists we should live our life where God finds us—that is, wherever we happen to be at the moment of His call.

Whether circumcised or uncircumcised (v 18), slave or freed-man (v 21), a person should remain as he was when called. This does not mean change is prohibited; Paul tells slaves that

if opportunities emerge in their historical place to become free they should take them. But the drift of his argument is summarized in verse 24: 'Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called called him to.'

The implication is clear: obedience to God can be rendered only where you are. That is the peculiar charm and power of your present place, wherever it may be. In whatever circumstances, in whatever town or country, at home or work, in jail or hospital—obedience where you are is your assignment from God. That is where you must decide whether or not you will obey Him.

ACTION

In the light of this, beware of changing your present situation in any way. Before you consider, for example, moving house, changing jobs or altering your geographical location, be absolutely sure you are not simply avoiding the decision to obey God in your present place. The implications of this for our highly mobile, unsettled, disconnected population today are overwhelming.

One of the enemy's great attacks on our processes of deciding to obey God is to keep us on the move. This does not mean we never move or change. We do—but only when God calls us to.

Decisive—About What? The answer to our second question—*what* are we to be decisive about?—runs along similar lines. We are to be decisive about the particular matters which confront us in our place and moment.

A common attitude today is that we need to have 'a Christian mind' about all sorts of issues. Thanks to modern communications, we have access to more information about the world than ever before. This has helped us in many ways—but it has also complicated the mind of the modern Christian.

I am not saying we should refuse to be interested in our distant neighbours. That would be to withdraw into a paro-

chial mentality which denies the reality of the modern world. But sadly, we are often better informed and our thinking is clearer about distant issues than about local ones which impinge on us directly. Like the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we are better equipped to travel to Jerusalem than to attend to our immediate neighbour (Lk 10:29–37). The result? Our minds are preoccupied with Jerusalem and we miss the neighbour at our feet. We can give a Christian opinion on many ‘important issues’—but in the decisions of everyday life we are disobedient because we are indecisive.

Life in the last days means an intense engagement with our present place and moment. Preoccupation with things other than the present can be a way of opting out of meeting the neighbour God calls us to love now. (This, of course, does not mean we ignore God’s global plan and the need to take the gospel anywhere in the world He is pleased to send us.)

ACTION

1 The Lord may be asking you as you read this to take a clear look at the way things are for you personally. Are you attending to the issues before you? Are you relating to your immediate family responsibilities well? Are there difficult matters in your working life which you are simply avoiding?

2 Do you have a ‘Christian mind’ about many modern issues but at the same time are running from the places where you encounter people day after day—people who require patience, longsuffering and care?

REFUSING TO DECIDE

There is a view of the Christian life which sees decision-making as essentially a matter of ‘getting guidance’ from God. Sometimes this entails a blatant refusal on the part of a person to decide anything at all.

This is not the same as being unable to decide due to a lack of information. What we are talking about is refusing to

decide because of an unwillingness to be held accountable for our actions. Very often, the 'getting guidance' viewpoint arises from a negation of this basic responsibility.

In what follows, the issue at stake is not whether God guides His people or not. That is never in question. Nor are we primarily concerned with the method of guidance. It is the *motive* for seeking guidance that is our concern—whether or not it is to avoid being decisive.

The refusal to decide fails to clearly distinguish certain key issues.

First, although God does promise He will live in us, that does not mean He will live *for* us. His promise of power is always associated with the faithful exercise of the believer's will to obey.

Second, the attempt to constantly 'get guidance' from God echoes the Pharisees' preoccupation with right action. It presumes that the basic question in life is to find the correct thing to do. It is preoccupied with *answers*. It does not attempt to relate to God personally, or if it does, the only possible relation it sees is that of listening to an 'answer-giving' God.

It is clear from the Bible that the faithful man is not called to 'get answers' but to follow a Guide—One who promises to travel with us, One who in the difficulties of life asserts, 'Despite all this, I am continually with you.' According to the Bible, prayer is not primarily a plea looking for something but for Someone. And this is precisely where we find ourselves. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. We must honour the ministry of the Spirit of Christ and obey His promptings, recognizing that all revelation comes from Him.

So we are not looking for answers to our questions so much as seeing what He, our resident Guide, will say about the issues we face. *He* will set the agenda for the questions we should ask—and if He sets the questions, the answers will also be forthcoming from Him. I do not say we will have His guidance before we act, for often it comes only *as* we act. That is what faith in the Holy Spirit is about. This is the difference

between the search for 'guidance' and the constant recourse we have to a Guide.

So we must never refuse to decide; we must not live passively. We must constantly exercise faith in the One who is within us to guide us. Then, and only then, can we expect answers. But they will be the answers He gives to the questions He has prompted. And they will come out of our submission to Him. Whether or not we will obey Him is always the immediate decision we must make.

So we never submit to God's Spirit to avoid making decisions. Rather, we ask Him for His command once we have committed our will to obey. This is a submitted but decisive life.

Third, another danger of this view is that it can imprison a person in a subjective understanding of guidance not open to the scrutiny of either the Bible or the brothers and sisters. This often goes hand in hand with laziness in using the mind to comprehend what God has said in the Scriptures.

In this kind of subjective understanding, a person will often justify a course of action by describing how they 'got' their 'guidance' (the method). Telling how it came to them (that is, describing the circumstances that led to their action) is considered enough to establish that the 'guidance' truly came from God. We need to make some observations about this practice.

- Describing a set of circumstances does not tell you the *meaning* of those circumstances. Any situation in the fallen world which depends on circumstances is ambiguous because of the presence of the Enemy. Is it God who is active in the circumstances or Satan? A totally circumstantial view of the world fails to understand the Fall (Point 2). Methods themselves are not clear pointers to truth.

- If the justification of a certain course of action relies on retelling circumstances along the lines of 'what this meant to me', this is simply a subjective report describing my personal interpretation of events. It can be no more than that—and it

certainly cannot be verified or falsified by others. Such retelling serves little purpose.

ACTION

In these comments I am not trying to downgrade the belief that God can act in ways that catch us by surprise. Rather, I am trying to point up a possible area of confusion, so that if someone's motivation in 'seeking guidance' is that of refusing to be decisive, he might see it for what it is, and repent, and cease to be disobedient in this area of responsibility.

Expecting God to make our decisions for us is only one mistake we can make. The other side of the coin is that some Christians do not believe it is possible to experience God's care in daily life at all. In this case, we need to assert the truth that God exercises control even in the midst of the hostile fallen world. His promise to be always with us brings great comfort in our life of decisions.

THE GREAT COMFORT OF GOD'S PROMISE

Standing over the whole of life, and particularly over the decisions we make, is the God who came to meet us in Jesus. His loving care is never taken from us. Even in the midst of our unfaithfulness He is always faithful.

This unchanging faithfulness of God has overwhelming significance for our decision-making. In Romans 8, after emphasizing that our present life involves waiting for the redemption of our bodies, Paul goes on to encourage us in this waiting with some important statements.

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

And we know that in all things God works for the

good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom 8:26–31).

In the context of waiting for Point 6 with patience (v 25), Paul tells us that we have the assistance of the Holy Spirit. He intercedes for us. When we find ourselves weak, not knowing how to pray as we ought, we have the promise that the Holy Spirit will actually be speaking with God on our behalf, according to God's will for us.

'In the same way' (v 26) points us back to the way the Holy Spirit assists us in our fight with sin, the active power resident in us. The same principle that applies concerning sin applies in praying: we should rely on the Holy Spirit to pray.

'We do not know how we ought to pray' is God's diagnosis of our condition. We must not fight this truth. He says that we do not know. We are foolish if we think that praying is easy. We need to trust that Someone else is praying. We do not know how to pray or what to pray for, so we need to exercise faith in the Person of the Holy Spirit. He is interceding for us. We are to co-operate with Him.

Our trust is also based on the fact that the Father, who searches our heart, seeing deep within us, knows the mind of the Spirit (v 27). There is communication between the Persons of the Godhead here, and this is the setting of the prayer Paul is speaking about. It is intercessory prayer which uses the interplay of communication between the Father and the Spirit. And our trust is therefore that the Spirit intercedes for us in God's way, 'in accordance with His will'.

Verses 28 to 30 assert another great promise of God.

Because He has called us to be His children, we have been caught up in His purpose for us. We are confident He is brooding over our life in a way that makes its outcome very sure, and as beautiful as it is certain. His foreknowing of us, His predestining us, has one purpose: so that we may be conformed to the image of His Son. God is remaking us to be like Jesus.

Paul understands the great action of God, in which we may confidently rest, as a chain of events involving foreknowing, predestining, calling, justifying, glorifying. Our life is coming to its great conclusion. We must be confident God will bring us to completion at the Day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6).

It is against this background that we understand his statement, 'in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose' (v 28). 'Good' here has the same meaning as in Genesis 1—2: it is the idea of 'the mind of God for us'. So when Paul says God is working for good with us, we take this to mean He will bring about what is in His mind for us. His purpose cannot be thwarted.

What are the implications of this for our living 'in the moment'? Just this: that we can have the same confidence about the events of our life here and now as we have about the final outcome of God's work in us. His promise assures us that, although we may make mistakes, we will not create circumstances which God cannot redeem. We will never find ourselves in a place where God cannot work all things for our good.

God can even turn our disobedience to His own account. This does not mean He wills our sin. It simply affirms that, wherever we are and whatever we have done, God can find us and turn our most wayward acts around to suit His purposes. This has two important effects.

First, it sets us free to make decisions in confidence and security, knowing we are in God's hands. This does not mean we are slack about our decisions, acting as if God will pick up

the tab. That would be to 'sin so that grace may abound', and about that idea Paul says, 'God forbid!' It does mean we do our decision-making in the knowledge that we ourselves are personally safe. This is a decisiveness born of true liberty.

Second, we understand something lovely: there is no such thing as 'God's second-best' for our life, as if we could miss the good which God has for us. We must not be bound by some idea that God has a 'blue-print' for our life which we stray from if we sin, and hence miss out on His 'perfect plan' for us.

We need to be careful here. We must distinguish between God's purpose in history and His purpose for our individual lives. It is perfectly understandable in terms of His great unfolding drama that sometimes the main Actor will move on to a new scene and people at centre stage with Him will be left behind. Samuel, for example, was chosen to move God's purpose forward while Eli was left behind (1 Sam 1—3). But in terms of our individual lives, although we regard sin seriously (for it really matters), we do have the confidence that God can redeem any situation so that His purpose for us is not thwarted.

People who talk to others about God's 'second-best' must be very careful of two things. First, they must be sure they are not making a condemnatory statement about another person's standing before God. That would be quite wrong. Second, even if they have discerned God's movement in history at a particular moment (a very prophetic claim!), they are trying to apply that discernment to the personal arena. In telling people they have missed God's plan, there is a great danger of causing them to give up hope.

ACTION

1 If you find yourself under this kind of condemnation, it is right to take a firm stand against it. One of the ways Satan accuses us over our mistakes is to rob us of any hope of being useful to God again. Resist this firmly. Forgive anyone who

may have been the instrument of this condemnation—and rise up to believe in God's ability to turn your situation around.

2 At the same time, understand that because you are significant and your decisions matter, you still have to live at the moment with the results of your sins. Each of us does: this is as true of the prisoner in jail who comes to know Christ as it is of the person who has the results of his past mistakes all around him. But place your faith in God for change, even while you must bear the results of the past every day.

Both realism about sin's effects and faith for God's transformation are true positions reflecting how He has made us and redeemed us. Let us have God's balance here working powerfully in our lives.

People who are justified and sinners, both at once, have the simultaneous certainty of knowing their sin is real and happens constantly, and that they live under the freedom of God's forgiveness and mercy, coupled with His promise that all things—and really, *all* things—will work together for their good.

The call to the decisive life is one of true freedom; it is a responsibility we must embrace and live out with faith.

ACTION

1 Rejoice in the wonderful truth that God has promised to bring you to the place which is His goal for you. Rest in that secure knowledge.

2 Be decisive in your living by understanding what God is like, what He is doing generally in history, and what He is doing specifically in your moment.

3 Be prepared to be used by God in any way He wishes. And in whatever you do, make sure He gets the glory.