

THE CHALLENGE OF HYPERCHOICE

THE POSTMODERN PHENOMENON OF HYPERCHOICE

Graham Cheesman, principal of Belfast Bible College, coined the phrase “hyperchoice” in his 1997 book, entitled simply *Hyperchoice*. He describes the phenomenon in his opening paragraphs:

Life today is a series of choices. Melanie's parents chose when she was to be born. Her grandmother took as long choosing between the different romper suits on offer at the local baby shop as she did knitting her first booties. As Melanie grew up, she began to make choices. There were hundreds of attractive toys in primary-coloured plastic advertised on children's television, and it was agonisingly difficult to decide which to ask for as birthday presents. But she did decide, and slowly she began to learn how to choose for herself.. Which was just as well. Soon she was choosing which club to join at school, what subjects to take and which of the many different chocolate bars on the newsagent's counter she would buy with her pocket money.

She decided to go to university, but first Melanie had to choose from thousands of different courses. In her free time, she can choose to go to one of the many different attractions in town, maybe a multiplex cinema. Or she can stay in, pick up the phone and speak to friend anywhere in the world. She can settle down with one of the 80,000 books to be published in the UK alone this year, or switch on the television and channel-hop until she finds something among the many programmes that interest her.

Soon Melanie will choose a job (if she is fortunate), a spouse (out of a theoretically wide range of possibilities) and where she will live. Along with these big decisions will arrive a whole bundle of new choices about lifestyle, materialism and what really matters. She will choose holidays from brochures advertising trips to most parts of the world, some of which she may be able to afford.

Eventually Melanie will grow old. By then, it is quite possible that she will be permitted to choose when to die (which, after all, is logical, since her parents chose when she was born). Her family will choose from a catalogue of coffins, and she may well be buried to hymns that she chose herself.

Increasing choice in every area of life is a major theme in postmodern society, and has become possible because of liberalisation of morality and legal restraints, and increased wealth leading to increased disposable income. This increased choice extends to the ethical and spiritual dimensions as well as the more mundane daily choices of food, clothes and leisure activities.

IS HYPERCHOICE GOOD OR BAD?

Hyperchoice is neither good or bad in itself, but does lead to an increased challenge for us as Christians, since we have more choices to make within the freedom we have been given in Christ. The Christian life is one of freedom in Christ, and with freedom comes increasing responsibility as to how we exercise freedom. We have freedom to determine our own path, but this does not mean that every possible choice is of equal value, as this anonymous proverb reminds us:

It may be true that there are two sides to every question, but it is also true that there are two sides to a sheet of flypaper, and it makes a big difference to the fly which side he chooses.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, about this:

'Everything is permissible' – but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible'--but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

(1 Corinthians 10:23&24)

These Christians had grasped hold of the truth that we as Christians do not live our lives by rules and regulations, but they had made this an excuse for them to behave whatever way they wanted, even breaking God's moral law (i.e. His eternal laws of right and wrong). They had made their catch-phrase “Everything is permissible!” How similar to our “Anything Goes!” 21st Century world! In his first letter to them the apostle reinforced the moral law by rebuking their sin, and then taught them how they could use their freedom in an appropriate way within the limits of what Scripture reveals to be acceptable. Rather than just saying, “Well it isn't wrong, and it doesn't hurt anyone else, so I can do it if I want”, every action should be judged by two criteria:

1. **Is it “beneficial”?** – does it help me to fulfill God's purpose of making me like Christ?
2. **Is it “constructive”?** – does it build something of real, lasting value into the lives of others and of the church?

The call is to thoughtful, responsible use of our freedom. It is God's greatest gift to us, so we should use it wisely.

GROUND-RULES ON GOD'S WILL:

1. God has a will for your life

... good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

God has a specific plan for your life – works for you to do that no one else can do. What kind of things does God want to guide you about? He does not always have only one correct decision for us on every issue – there are many decisions in life where He gives us the freedom to make our own decision within the constraints of His moral Law. For example, God does not have a correct set of clothes for you to wear each day, and you do not need to ask God to guide you about a simple decision like that. Even in some of the bigger decisions in life God may not have a correct and incorrect answer, but there may be one answer that is better for you than the others.

The challenge is to have a clear sense of being in God's will in every part of our lives – the mundane as well as the obviously spiritual. We should be able to be like the great medieval Christian Francis of Assisi. Once, while Francis was hoeing his garden, he was asked, "What would you do if you suddenly learned that you were to die at sunset today?" He replied, "I would finish hoeing my garden." His life was ordered in a way that reflected his priorities, and every activity had its proper place. Can we say the same?

2. God's will is always consistent with His word and character

God's will is good, pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2) because He is good and perfect! This means that the benchmark standard of God's will for us is His written word, as He does not change His standard! It also means that we can be absolutely confident that God's will is the best path for our lives. The only way that we can know peace, satisfaction and true fulfilment is to be in the centre of His will.

3. God wants us to know and obey His will

God's will is **discerned NOT divined** – it is not hidden knowledge that only some Christians are able to tap into, and then reveal to the rest of us, but is meant to be known to all of us! This is in contrast with the postmodern obsession with the occult, shown in the increase in astrology, mysticism and fortune telling. These things are all forms of divination, which is the attempt to discover secret or hidden (the meaning of "occult" is "hidden") knowledge through special means. Unfortunately we Christians sometimes treat God's will in this way, thinking if we can only get the right technique and pray in the right way we will finally be admitted to understanding His will. This is complicated by some modern preachers who give the impression that they have a deeper understanding of God's will than others and can reveal it directly to others. God wants every Christian to seek and know His will for their own lives – you don't need a "medium" to receive His guidance for you, you need to learn discernment!

Another mistake we often make in seeking God's will is exemplified in the following true story:
An old Scottish woman went from home to home across the countryside selling thread, buttons, and shoestrings. When she came to an unmarked crossroad, she would toss a stick into the air and go in the direction the stick pointed when it landed.

One day, however, she was seen tossing the stick up several times. "Why do you toss the stick more than once?" someone asked. "Because," replied the woman, "it keeps pointing to the left, and I want to take the road on the right." She then dutifully kept throwing the stick into the air until it pointed the way she wanted to go!

Unfortunately we Christians often make the mistake of thinking that we can "twist God's arm" to do our wills, or convincing ourselves that our own desire must be right after all. Too often this is reflected in our prayers – rather than praying, as Jesus taught, that God's will would be done (Matthew 6:10), we try to convince Him that what we want is best for us! Even Christ, as He faced the cross prayer "not my will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). God's will is best, and we must be prepared to submit to it in humility.

PRE-REQUISITES FOR KNOWING GOD'S WILL

Whilst God wants us to know His will, we will not know it unless we take His will for us seriously. There are three pre-requisites for knowing God's will, without which it will be almost impossible for us to know it:

1. Be committed to God's purpose for your life

This principle runs throughout the book of Proverbs. The writer is commending wisdom to the reader – teaching the younger man that wisdom must be the guiding principle for his life. Wisdom is the ability to use knowledge to make choices with results that are beneficial and constructive. The beginning of wisdom is to “fear God” (Proverbs 9:10) – that is to give Him the respect and worship that He deserves. In one of the most famous passages in the book, the writer tells us how we can walk in the paths that God directs for us:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do, and He will direct your paths. (Proverbs 3:5&6)

If we are genuinely seeking to honour God in every part of our lives, seeking His will and trusting Him (walking by faith), He **will** guide us. This guidance will often be step by step, rather than for years or months ahead. It enough to know with every step that He lays down straight paths for us to walk in. Our daily prayer should be as simple as the prayer made at a meeting for Christian sports people by a baseball player called Bobby Richardson:

“Dear God, Your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Amen.”

In the process of knowing God's will we should remember that God has purposes for the life of every Christian. His specific will for your life will always add towards one or more of these, and will never contradict them:

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| 1) To know God and put Him first in our lives | WORSHIP |
| <i>“love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind” (Matthew 22:37)</i> | |
| 2) To love other people in God's family | FELLOWSHIP |
| <i>“Love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:39)</i> | |
| 3) To become more like Jesus | GROWTH |
| <i>“God ... chose them to become like His Son” (Romans 8:29)</i> | |
| 4) To use the gifts God has given us to serve Him | SERVICE |
| <i>“God has given gifts to each of you ... Manage them well” (1 Peter 4:10)</i> | |
| 5) To reach other people for Jesus | WITNESS |
| <i>“go and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19)</i> | |

The Scriptures also make several very clear statements about God's will for every Christian. Again, His specific will in specific decisions will always lead to an increase in these areas. It is God's will for you in every situation at every time that you should experience:

- I. **Increasing Christ-likeness (sanctification):**
 - a. Avoiding sexual impurity – 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8
 - b. Wise, Spirit-filled living – Ephesians 5:15-21
 - c. Non-conformation, transformation, and renewal – Romans 12:1-2
- II. **Continual rejoicing, ceaseless prayer, and constant thanksgiving**
– 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
- III. **Sincere, humble service** – Ephesians 6:5-9

2. Walk closely with the Lord

As we walk with the Lord, our desires are shaped after His own heart, as the psalmist said:

Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you your heart's desires. Commit everything you do to the Lord. Trust Him, and He will help you. (Psalm 37:4&5)

This does NOT mean that God will give us whatever we want – it means that He will give us what **He** wants because as we delight in Him, our desire is more and more to know Him and to honour Him, and we no longer want those things that are not in keeping with His will.

If we expect to know God's will we should be living daily in close relationship with Him. Christian author, Elizabeth Elliot, whose husband was killed by South American Indians he had gone to reach with the gospel in the 1950s, tells the story of two adventurers who came to see her, complete with equipment for an expedition to the rain forest east of the Andes. They did not ask her for advice, but just asked for a few phrases to converse with the Indians. She writes:

Sometimes we come to God as the two adventurers came to me – confident and, we think, well-informed and well equipped. But has it occurred to us that with all our accumulation of stuff, something is missing? We often ask God for too little. We know what we need--a yes or no answer, please, to a simple question. Or perhaps a road sign. Something quick and easy to point the way. What we really ought to have is the Guide himself. Maps, road signs, a few useful phrases are things, but infinitely better is someone who has been there before and knows the way.

Christ has been here, and has completely fulfilled God's will – He can be our Guide if we walk daily in close relationship with Him.

3. Let your mind be transformed, not conformed

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will." **(Romans 12:1&2)**

There are two important parts to this:

- a) **Do not be conformed** – what influences shape our thinking? What do we fill our minds with? How can we expect to hear God's calling if our ears are always filled with the noise of this world? How can we discern His will if we are thinking from a purely human, worldly point of view?
- b) **Do be transformed** – as we offer our lives to Him as living sacrifices, God will transform us to become more and more like Christ, so that we begin to think in the same way as God thinks! The more we know Him, the more we will see our world and our choices through His eyes.

HOW TO DISCERN GOD'S WILL

This process starts with a thought or desire OR with an invitation or suggestion from another person. We must not just follow every impulse automatically, but must heed the warning of John Wesley:

Do not hastily ascribe things to God. Do not easily suppose dreams, voices, impressions, visions or revelations to be from God. They may be from Him. They may be from nature. They may be from the Devil.

To discern whether an idea is from God and pleasing to Him, we can subject it to six key tests:

1. THE TEST OF GOD'S WORD

Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path (Psalm 119:105)

If you have a desire to do something that the Bible teaches is wrong, you can be sure that this desire does not come from God (it must be from your sinful nature, the influence of the world or from the devil). As the Westminster Confession of Faith states:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture, unto which nothing at anytime is to be added whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of man.

The Bible is the most important test of everything in our lives. It gives us rules for living our lives the way God wants us to, but does not give yes or no answers for most specific decisions in our lives. However, the more we fill our minds with the truth of the Bible the more we will develop wisdom, as Scriptural principles shape our thinking.

BUT a word of warning is necessary. We must have a **proper** understanding, of Scripture. We should not take verses randomly (i.e. open the Bible and point to find a "verse for the moment") or out of context (e.g. taking a promise given by God to an individual in a particular situation and claiming it a promise to us in a different situation). These practices are actually forms of divination, and, whilst God could possibly speak in this way, we should never take this as authoritative in the same way as universal commands (e.g. the 10 commandments). The truth of Scripture is intended to be understood in context as the Spirit leads.

2. THE TEST OF SANCTIFIED REASON

As Christians we do not depend on our own reason to answer questions, but we should be thinking people, and our faith is never in conflict with reason. God calls us to love Him with all our heart, soul **AND MIND** (Matthew 22:37), and loving Him with our entire mind means using our intellect to reason the relative value of two options. This is not simply the same as "common sense" – rather, as our minds are transformed (see above) we will develop "sanctified reason", or "holy sense". JI Packer describes this process of reason in His book, *Your Father Loves You*:

First, we must be willing to think. It is false piety, super-supernaturalism of an unhealthy pernicious sort that demands inward impressions with no rational base, and declines to

heed the constant biblical summons to consider. God made us thinking beings, and he guides our minds as we think things out in his presence.

Second, we must be willing to think ahead and weigh the long-term consequences of alternative courses of action. Often we can only see what is wise and right, and what is foolish and wrong, as we dwell on the long-term issues ... we must be willing to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves. We must suspect ourselves: ask ourselves why we feel a particular course of action will be right and make ourselves give reasons.

Ignoring sanctified reason can be disastrous. Take the example of the following story:

A young couple wanted to buy a home, but felt it was too expensive for them. They told God, "If you want us to buy it, 1) have the contractor accept only 1/2 of what he's asking for the down payment, and 2) have the bank approve our loan. Both events happened and they bought the home. They soon began to go into debt. The problem: what to do now, since God "directed" them to do this!

Did God direct them? Their decision was opposed to reason. Either it was not God's timing for them to make the move or they simply followed a desire that was not from Him. They could have avoided disaster if they had thought and prayed about their decision first.

We should develop the healthy principle of interrogating our desires – rigorously asking questions to determine the best course of action. I like the following questions devised by a professor at Stanford for testing problems, which we can apply to many important decisions:

1. Is there a new way to do it?
2. Can you borrow or adapt?
3. Can you give it a new twist?
4. Do you merely need more of the same?
5. Less of the same?
6. Is there a substitute?
7. Can the parts be rearranged?
8. What if we do just the opposite?
9. Can ideas be combined?

After reasoning in this way we may decide the decision is still worth pursuing, or that it really is not in keeping with good sense.

3. THE TEST OF GIFTING

Part of the reasoning process should include awareness of our own gifting. It is not likely that God will ask you to do something that He has not gifted you to do – for example, if you are no good at maths, it is unlikely that God is calling you to be an accountant. Our gifting will be confirmed by recognition from other people. Often people feel that God might be calling them to a particular ministry because they have been challenged by a sermon, or the example of a person they admire, but first they need to then ask has God gifted them to do this work! Has God given you the ability to carry this desire through yourself, or should you pray for the right person to come along? God did not make a mistake when He made you, with your particular personality, strengths, weaknesses and abilities – He made you that way so that you could do the work He has for you to do in His plan.

4. THE TEST OF PRAYER

If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives
(Galatians 5:25)

It is through prayer that we will hear the inner voice of God's Spirit confirming the desire. The question to ask is: "When you pray about it, does the desire increase or decrease? Do you feel peace or unease?" If you do not have an immediate answer, keep on praying. Too often we are impatient, not willing to wait for God's timing. As Packer reminds us:

we must be willing to wait. "Wait on the Lord" is a constant refrain in the Psalms and it is a necessary word, for the Lord often keeps us waiting. When in doubt, do nothing, but continue to wait on God.

God's will is always best, and His time is always best, and it is always worth waiting for Him.

5. THE TEST OF WISE ADVICE

Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance. (Proverbs 20:18)

The writer of Proverbs repeatedly (12:15, 13:10, 15:22, 19:20, 20:18) calls us to take wise advice. It is a worrying thing that Christians seem to be so reluctant to seek advice from church leaders and older Christians even in the biggest decisions in life! Of course, the advice must be wise, and it is important that we think about who we seek advice from. You should look for two qualities in people you consult for advice:

- a. They should know God well – find a godly, mature Christian

- b. They should know you well – find someone who knows your strengths, weaknesses, gifts and temptations, and who will be honest with you about their suspicions.

People who have been Christians longer than you may have had similar decisions to make in their own lives, and (if they are godly) they will often be wiser than you. They may also see weaknesses and temptations in your life that you do not see. These Christian advisors will not always be correct, but they will usually have something helpful to share with you that will help in your process of reasoning.

And if we think we are too mature or experienced to need advice, we should heed JI Packer's warning:

It is a sign of conceit and immaturity to dispense with taking advice in major decisions. There are always people who know the Bible, human nature, and our own gifts and limitations better than we do, and even if we cannot finally accept their advice, nothing but good will come to us from carefully weighing what they say.

6. THE TEST OF CIRCUMSTANCES

God often guides us through opportunities that He opens up in our lives. When a new opportunity arises we should always ask whether God might be working in it to lead us into something new. God is in control of our whole universe, and we should expect that He will work through things that seem to us to be coincidences. If God is leading you to do something, He will give you the opportunity in His time. After you have applied the five tests above to the initial thought, come back to the question of whether the opportunity is presenting itself. If it is not, do not try to force the situation through your own effort. As someone has said,

When God bolts the door, don't try to get in through the window.

Instead, go back to the five tests above and wait for God's timing. If it is His plan for you, He will make it perfect in His time.

However, it is important to remember that circumstances are the final and least sensitive of the tests. If we make them the first test, we may make the same mistake John Wesley made in his marriage. While crossing a bridge in London, he stumbled and sprained his ankle. Some friends carried him to the house of Mrs. Mary Vazielle, a widow with several children. She cared for Wesley, and his response to her concern was to ask her to marry him. If we were writing fiction we might say that the sprained ankle was God's providential way to bring those people together. But the marriage was a disaster, and Mary finally left John. If Wesley had taken advice from his brother Charles, and used sanctified reason and prayerful consideration, he might have avoided that unfortunate situation.

CONCLUSION – THE MOVIE OF YOUR LIFE

How serious are we about knowing God's will? Eleanor Roosevelt once said:

One's philosophy is not best expressed in words. It is expressed in the choices one makes.

This is all too true, and for Christians in the age of Hyperchoice, we must be increasingly thoughtful in our choices. The question we should ask is whether our decisions will add to our lives to make it something more or less pleasing to God. Does it add to the flow of God's purpose for us, or conflict with it or distract from the theme of our life?

Film maker Walt Disney was ruthless in cutting anything that got in the way of a story's pacing. Ward Kimball, one of the animators for *Snow White*, worked for 240 days on a 4.5 minute sequence in which the dwarfs made soup for Snow White and almost destroyed the kitchen in the process. Disney thought it was funny, but he decided the scene stopped the flow of the picture, so out it went.

When the film of your life is complete, will it be as great as it might be? Will the scenes that you have chosen to include reflect the theme that you profess for your life? How much will be left on the floor of God's cutting room, and how much will carry into eternity? You have the opportunity now through careful choices to **ensure that the scenes of your life's movie match its theme** – the glory and honour of God!