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**Spirit-led Decision-Making:**

**How to better balance head, heart, and spirit in discerning the will of God**

What are the best practices for discerning the will of God and making Spirit-led decisions for your personal life, family, ministry, and leadership? What kind of help can you rightly expect from the Holy Spirit? What falls on your shoulders, to figure out on your own? These questions are especially relevant for important personal concerns, such as determining whom we will marry or our calling in life, as well as for many other significant matters related to our ministries and leadership. Leaders continually have to grapple with making tough decisions, such as how to address pressing social issues, resolve conflicts and controversies, set priorities for their church or institution, guide others, respond to crises, and handle numerous other demanding situations that confront them.

As I am writing this article, Myanmar and the rest of the world are in the midst of a global crisis of unprecedented magnitude in my lifetime. COVID-19 has been spreading rapidly, infecting millions, and killing hundreds of thousands of people. Worldwide, billions have been forced by their governments to stay at home for weeks on end, many of whom cannot work or pay their bills, and many are in danger of starving to death. As I write this article, most schools and churches are still closed. Leaders, including pastors, administrators, and teachers, have been thrust into uncharted territory, created a huge amount of uncertainty and fear about the future.

What is God's will—not for the coronavirus, but for those of us (nearly everyone) who must make tough decisions about what we do, where we go, how we live, what kind of ministry we still can offer, and other related questions of life and leadership?

This article does not attempt to offer specific answers to this present crisis, but steps back to look at the bigger question of how any Christian, but especially leaders, can discern the will of God and make Spirit-led decisions when the answer isn't immediately clear and when the stakes are high. We will discuss some of the leading challenges in discerning the will of God and the necessity of creating and utilizing a discernment process in decision-making. Different kinds of decisions require different resources. Some matters require more intellectual capital, theological reflection, or technical knowledge, while others require more practical skills, emotional intelligence, or common sense. We do not have space to try to discuss all types of decision-making situations or all the possible resources one could draw on. Instead, we will look more narrowly at some of the most helpful intellectual resources that have been utilized by church leaders, historically, in their efforts to arrive at thoughtful, balanced decisions related to doctrine or practical theological matters. We will also discuss the important role of the Holy Spirit and review some practical suggestions for reaching the best possible, Spirit-led decisions at the end of a discernment process. Finally, we're going to look at one of the biggest challenges to good decision-making, namely the human tendency to react irrationally in a stressful situation, rather than stay grounded, thoughtful, and faithful. To illustrate this latter topic, I am going to share my personal experience from this past March when I had to face a difficult decision about whether I should stay in Myanmar to continue my ministry or return home early in light of the COVID-19 global crisis.

Ultimately, discerning the will of God is not a science with a set formula that will always produce a guaranteed result. It is also not magical, whereby we must wait for signs and strange feelings in order to hear from God. God's presence is unseen, and his prompting may not be easily detected; but that doesn't mean God is not active. Spirit-led leaders need to balance input from the head (rationality), heart (feelings and values), and spirit (how we sense God prompting us). We need both to take initiative to work toward making a timely, intelligent decision, based on the information available to us, on one hand; and to continually listen for the Spirit's voice, notice open and closed doors, and trust God to lead and guide, on the other.<sup>1</sup>

### **Discerning the will of God can be difficult**

When is it hardest for you to know what to do or how to make a good decision? What makes knowing the will of God so challenging at certain times? Based on my experience and input from hundreds of pastors and leaders in the workshops I've led on Spirit-Led Leadership in Myanmar and elsewhere, the various challenges related to discerning the will of God can be grouped into seven categories.

1. Personal/spiritual issues: When there's sin in our lives, resistance, distraction, or rebellion against God's leading, we don't want to listen to God or cooperate with the Holy Spirit's leading.

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<sup>1</sup> This article expands on material that I have written elsewhere. See Chapter Three, "Be Discerning," in *Saying Yes to God: How to Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017) 51-61; and *Teaching Notes* for my "Spirit-Led Leadership" workshop. The full pdf version of the course can be accessed under the "Teaching and Sermons" tab in Faith, Hope, and Love Global Ministries' Resource Library at [www.fhlglobal.org](http://www.fhlglobal.org).

2. Social issues: Conflict with others, disruptive church members, fear of displeasing others, intense disagreements, power struggles, and the like can create so much turmoil socially that it becomes hard to discern God's voice amid all the other competing voices. Under such circumstances, it can also very challenging to work toward consensus in peaceful, rational ways.

3. Emotional issues: Sometimes our own personal issues or circumstances produce so much emotion within us, we may feel too overwhelmed, afraid, or upset to pray.

4. Intellectual issues: When we stop to think about the tough decision that needs to be made, many questions may come to mind that make us pause or undermine our confidence in God's leading. E.g., We may want to start a new church. Did this idea come from God or from ourselves? Or, as another example, in the midst of the current COVID-19 crisis, how should we understand suffering and loss—are they God's will or the result of evil in the world, natural dangers, or the sinful choices of others? Or, when a new idea comes to us that energizes us to take action, how do we distinguish our own desires from God's will?

5. Differences of opinion. How do we decide what to do when there are competing opinions on God's will or multiple good options? E.g., We must create a strategic plan for our church or group, but different people have different ideas about what they think God wants to do. Or, what do we do when our views clash with the views or policies of those in authority? The senior leaders may have the authority and power, but younger leaders believe that they are listening better to the voice of God. Who's right?

6. Proper interpretation of circumstances: How do we interpret opposition, resistance, set-backs, and failure? Are they signs that we were misguided when we thought we knew what God wanted us to do? Was it a matter of wrong timing? Was our failure due to our lack of planning or not working hard enough? Was the plan a good idea, but just the wrong place to do

it? Were we not listening well enough to the voices of others in the congregation? E.g., Imagine you tried to start a new program to help widows learn how to grow their own food and to sell it, but you couldn't find enough money to buy seeds, and some people in the village opposed the idea. Should you conclude that your plan was not God's will? Perhaps it was God's will, but you need to go about it differently or be more patient. The point is, it's not uncommon for people to jump to conclusions about why something happened or didn't happen, but a thoughtful leader must prayerfully consider the multiple options for explanations in discerning how God is leading.

7. No answer from God. One of the most frequently cited difficulties in discerning the will of God is silence. We pray, but we hear nothing. We wait, but no insight comes. What should we do then? Typically, most of us just go on, with or without a clear answer from God. Yet, we use God language to justify our decisions. Is that appropriate? What is your theology behind your decision-making? When is common sense or the viewpoint of the leader enough to make a decision, and when should Christian leaders insist on waiting for an answer from God before moving ahead? If you decide to wait, how would you know if and when you got an answer?

### **Create a thoughtful, Spirit-led discernment process**

In light of all the challenges, issues, and complexities we've been outlining, experience and wisdom suggest that Christian leaders will need to create a thoughtful process for discerning the will of God and making tough, Spirit-led decisions. We are not talking here about emergency decisions that require rapid action, such as clearing a burning building, fleeing danger, rushing to turn off the water when a water pipe breaks. Rather, on one hand, we're talking about addressing doctrinal or practical theological matters, such as new theological ideas or doing mission in the

modern context. On the other hand, we're talking about the important practical issues of life and leadership, be it choosing a marriage partner, vocation, employment, leading congregations or other groups of people, handling major conflicts, responding to crises and community-threatening forces, strategic planning, and the like. In general, the goal of a discernment process in group settings should be to reach a consensus among the leaders (and among as many of the other stakeholders as possible) as to how God is leading or what is the wisest, most faithful course of action to choose. But how can we get there?

Making good decisions, by which I mean Spirit-led decisions that well serve the cause of Christ and his kingdom, requires, first of all, identifying what kind of decision needs to be made and who needs to be involved in the discernment process. Does it pertain to doctrine or practical matters? Does it concern individuals, the whole church, the Association, the whole denomination, or someone else? Is it time-sensitive (i.e., you need to make the decision quickly) or something that you can take your time on? Is it meant to address a temporary situation (e.g., how to get food during the lockdown), or will it be foundational for the future (e.g., creating a policy on faculty qualifications or teaching standards)? Is it stemming from a crisis (e.g., COVID-19), a longer-term problem (e.g., drug and alcohol use among teenagers at church or lack of academic competency among students), or a desire to create something new or better (e.g., starting a new music program or outreach to Buddhist neighbors)? Many leaders may be readily aware of what kind of decision needs to be made and its implications for the future, but not everyone else is. Good leadership requires making the effort to articulate to others what is being discussed, why it's important, who will be affected by the decision, and who should be involved in the decision-making process.

Good leadership (and good time-management in general) also requires differentiating

between important versus unimportant issues, as well as urgent versus non-urgent matters. Too many leaders waste too much time on unimportant issues or focus exclusively on urgent issues, while most of one's time should be spent thinking about the most important, non-urgent matters. If it is important, then by definition, it should be a high priority for the church, institution or organization; but not just when it is urgent. If you spend most of your time putting out fires (only addressing urgent matters), so to speak, you are more of a fire-fighter than a leader, and your leadership will likely be scattered and frantic. However, if you can focus most of your efforts on important, but nonurgent matters, then you will have enough time to think strategically and work toward a solid, well-supported decision in a measured, calm manner.<sup>2</sup> The church today needs leaders, true, Spirit-led leaders, not just firefighters or busy ministers, fulfilling ordinary duties. Get clear about what kind of decision needs to be made, how important it is (or isn't), and how urgent it is. Then, based on your clarity, you will be able to determine how much time and effort to put into a discernment and decision-making process, as well as who needs to be invited to participate in the process.

Once you decide what kind of decision needs to be made, who should be involved in the process, and what your time frame is for making a decision, then you need to identify and draw upon the most important resources. All resources are potentially useful, but they are not equal. If the issue is doctrinal (e.g., how the church understands and talks about who God is) or relates to practical theology (e.g., how the church should function as the body of Christ or how to address significant, modern-day social issues that pertain to the church), then Wesley's Quadrilateral, which is sometimes called the four-legged stool, provides critical, time-tested resources:

Scripture, tradition, reason, and Christian experience. If the issue pertains to human relationships

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<sup>2</sup> Well known (now deceased) author, educator and inspirational speaker, Stephen Covey, famously differentiated between important versus non-important, and urgent versus non-urgent tasks, in his "time management matrix," in his best-selling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* (New York: Free Press, 1979, 2004).

(such as conflict resolution), strategic planning, or some other practical matter, then there are a whole host of more suitable resources available from books, the internet, mentors, etc. that wise and competent leaders will avail themselves of.

### *Intellectual Resources*

Broadly speaking, church leaders have historically drawn on four resources or tool (clear principles, standards, guidelines and values) to help them in their discernment and decision-making processes. Here, alongside traditional methods of discernment, such as weighing pros and cons, thinking through the options, gathering input from others, evaluating opportunities against our highest values and priorities, and praying for God's guidance, the four-legged stool of the Protestant tradition is a valuable starting place as new questions, issues, and needs arise over time: Scripture, reason, church tradition, and Christian experience.

1. Scripture. According to Paul, Scripture (by which he meant the Old Testament) is useful for matters of faith, the development of character, and equipping for good works and useful service (2 Timothy 3:15-17). How much weight do you give to Scripture (Old and New Testaments) in the development of your theology and church practice? Is the Bible the authority for matters of faith and practice, an inspired guide to be consulted, a collection of wise suggestions for inspiration, or something else? When, if ever, is it permissible to develop theology or adopt a course of action that is not supported or even runs contrary to teaching in Scripture?
2. Church polity and tradition. Every time a new question or idea arises, one of the resources leaders can draw upon is the thinking and practice of those who went



before us. E.g., Suppose a couple brings their dying infant to the pastor and asks that he be baptized. Depending on your denomination, the pastor may agree or not. Baptists, for example, would not need to hold a lengthy discernment process about whether or not to baptize the dying infant, because Baptists historically do not baptize children who are not old enough to confess their faith in Christ.

Baptist pastors will readily pray for the family and the health of the child, and they may commit the dying child into God's mercy and care, trusting God to do what is right, based on his perfect wisdom. However, they won't baptize the child. No discernment process is needed. Tradition holds sway, in this case.

3. Reason. Feelings are important to us, because they alert us to what's important to us. However, when it comes to decision making, reason (or rational thinking) is critical to making good decisions. Good reasoning depends upon examining our presuppositions, gathering facts and information, and considering the emotional and other practical implications of our decisions on others. How do you capitalize on the contributions of both reason and feelings? How will you guard against irrational decision-making? How will you guard against unfeeling, insensitive rationalizations?
4. Experience. John Wesley added "Experience" as the fourth leg of the discernment stool, which earlier Protestant Reformers had not factored into their model. Pastor Steve Manskar provides a very good, simple explanation of this fourth leg of the stool. He wrote the following online:

Experience is our real-life encounter of God-with-us in our ordinary, every-day life. These encounters with the divine bring us to and keep us with God. They inform our thinking and understanding of who God is and how God works in the world (reason) and breathes life into our reading of Scripture and living out of the

tradition. Experience is the Holy Spirit's work in, with, and through us that gives life and meaning to the good news of God for the world in Jesus Christ. Experience allows the Holy Spirit to work in us to make faith vital and life-giving. It forms us into channels of God's grace for the world. We become living witnesses for Jesus Christ in the world and follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship, and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Experience is like salt because it adds flavor to Scripture, tradition, and reason and makes them taste good. "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him" (Psalm 34:8).<sup>3</sup>

To be able to draw on your Christian experience in helpful ways in a discernment and decision-making process, we need to learn how to draw lessons from how we have seen God at work in our lives over the years. How would you describe your personal experience with God? What experiences with God have helped you to know God better and discern God's will for your life or your church? What conclusions will you draw from your experience without over-generalizing from it? How will you challenge your interpretations of experience, when need be?

For example, if you have experienced the life-transforming power of God's mercy and grace personally, you might choose to be more forgiving to someone who has broken the letter of the law. By the letter of the law and tradition, the woman caught in adultery deserved to be stoned to death, but Jesus' compassion and pastoral sensitivity chose a course of action that diffused the emotionally-charged situation and led to redemptive, constructive alternative for the woman (John 8).

Or, as another example, if you experienced God working through someone normally not included in leadership, you may consider becoming more inclusive

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<sup>3</sup> Pastor Steve Manskar, "Teaching the Quadrilateral" <http://accountablediscipleship.blogspot.com/2009/07/teaching-quadrilateral.html>. Unfortunately, it was no longer accessible as I wrote this article.

of all ages, genders, ethnic groups, etc. in choosing ministers and leaders, regardless of whatever of the restrictions stemming from tradition. Or, if you sense that church tradition has been unduly unloving or lacking compassion for a group of people, you may be willing to make changes in church policy in order to be more loving and inclusive.

### A brief case study

Historically, abolishing slavery is an example of churches changing their policies on the basis of their experience (the Holy Spirit's conviction), even though slave owners appealed to Scripture, reason, and tradition to justify themselves. The Old Testament permitted slavery and provided guidelines to ancient Israel to govern who could be slaves and how they were to be treated. In the New Testament, biblical writers instructed slaves to be submissive to their masters. Though masters were not to be harsh toward their slaves, they are not instructed to free them. At least in the United States, Southern Baptists allowed church members to own slaves. Reason supported the practice as well, at least from the standpoint of the economic well-being of the slave owners. However, over time, Christian voices in both England and America began to rise up against the immorality of slavery.

In England, John Wesley (1703-91), the author of the quadrilateral concept that we've been discussing (drawing on Scripture, tradition, reason, and Christian experience in discerning the will of God), argued vociferously against slavery as a "personal sin and social injustice," and chastised his fellow citizens for objecting to the mistreatment of slaves but failing to outlaw the practice.<sup>4</sup> Novelist Shaunta Alberger illustrates how abolitionists drew on Scripture in fresh ways

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<sup>4</sup> See, John Wesley, *Thoughts upon Slavery*. For the electronic version, go to <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/wesley/wesley.html>, accessed, April 21, 2020.

to oppose slavery, even though it had been traditionally accepted and was supported by both Scripture and reason. She writes:

William Wilson, an abolitionist, stated that slavery went against the basic beliefs of Christianity. His main argument was the biblical principle of man being made in God's image. Abolitionists also believed that slavery went against God's Golden Rule, to love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>5</sup>

Likewise, in the United States, American (Northern) Baptists, among others, were horrified by the practice of kidnapping Africans and forcing them into a lifetime of slavery. However, one group of Baptists, primarily in the South, justified the practice. This division was a leading cause for the creation of the Southern Baptist Convention (1845) and ultimately the civil war (1861-65).<sup>6</sup> Eventually, more and more people, globally, became convinced that the principles of love of neighbor and equal respect for all human being as creations of God won the day.

The church's change in viewpoint on slavery does not pertain to doctrine but to practical theology. The church (and society) needed to make a tough decision about whether Christians would continue with their traditional interpretation of Scripture and acceptance of societal practices or apply the principle of love of neighbor in new ways, at huge economical and social costs. This case study illustrates how Christians experience (in this case, the love, mercy, and compassion of God), along with a fresh reading of Scripture, led to new ways of thinking and validated a more humane, inclusive treatment of a formerly exploited and mistreated race.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://classroom.synonym.com/what-ethical-theories-were-used-to-abolish-slavery-12085396.html>, accessed April 21, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ben T. Gourley argues this point the website created for his book, *Baptists and the American Civil War: Crucible of Faith and Freedom* (Macon, GA: Nurturing Faith, 2015), <http://civilwarbaptists.com/featured/slavery/>, dated February 8, 2017, accessed April 21, 2020.

*How does the Holy Spirit fit in?*

For Protestants, discerning the will of God and seeking to make major decisions that affect the life of the church require thoughtful use of all four of the primary resources discussed above (Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience). Generally speaking, Scripture holds the place of first importance among the four, but the Bible cannot be properly interpreted without consideration of how the God has been at work over the past 2000 years in the church (tradition), how the Spirit has been working through our experience today, and the role of reason. Yet, having established the importance of these four intellectual resources, the most important factor in discerning the will of God and decision-making, of course, remains the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God's voice to speak to us through Scripture, to give us wisdom as we apply reason, and to guide leaders in establishing and re-evaluating church tradition. The Holy Spirit is the one who brings to human consciousness neglected values, such as love of neighbor, that might need to be applied in new ways today. And it is the Spirit who enables us to draw lessons from our experience, which produce insight and wisdom into social conflicts and modern issues.

In other words, the most important component of any Spirit-led discernment process is actually listening for the voice of the Spirit and trusting God to guide us along the way.<sup>7</sup> Yet, dependence on the Spirit is not instead of using our minds. This is where some Christian leaders and churches get confused.

New Testament scholar and author, Jack Levison, rightly points out, the Holy Spirit does not function separately from our minds, but often (and even usually) works through a process of

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<sup>7</sup> Many good books have been written on the subject of discerning the will of god, both for individuals and for churches. one that does a particularly good job of helping discerners listen to their bodies as well as their minds and hearts is Elizabeth Liebert's *The Way of Discernment*. Liebert identifies several components in seeking discernment, most of which are within ourselves: our memory, intuition, body, imagination, reason, and feelings; and one outside of ourselves in nature.

studying Scripture, careful thinking, and even heated debate among others committed to discerning the will of God.<sup>8</sup> We need to use our minds to assess what is truly going on in our circumstances and to think through the complexities involved in our options. We also need to use our minds to avoid confusing our desires and wishes with the leading of the Holy Spirit. As most of us have certainly learned over the years, there is often a big difference between what one wants to be true and what is actually true.

A discernment process, then, is not instead of listening and cooperating with the Holy Spirit but depends on it. It is a thoughtful way to discern the will of God, which relies on and trusts the Spirit for guidance. It involves creating a careful, step by step process, which draws on the four primary intellectual resources (Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience) while utilizing all the practical methods that many have found so helpful over the years.

#### *A Spirit-led discernment process*

To be led by the Holy Spirit, leaders of a discernment process need to be prepared to answer the following questions:

1. How will we seek the Holy Spirit's guidance? How will we listen for the voice of God? (That is, what spiritual practices will we employ?)
2. How will we discern the leading of the Spirit together as a family, church, institution, or some other group? (That is, how will we know when an idea comes from God?)
3. How will we distinguish between the Holy Spirit's prompting and our own desires, fears, ambitions, etc.?
4. Are we willing to test every idea or belief to see if it fits with the ways we know the Spirit leads, based on Scripture and Christian experience?

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Levison, *Inspired: The Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013) 115.

## 5. What will we do if we don't hear God's voice or perceive any direct leading?

In general, as pastor and author, the Rev. Graham Standish, repeatedly stresses in his books on church leadership, the most important thing in a discernment process is to prayerfully seek God's will.<sup>9</sup> In practice, Standish advises:

- Create a process of discernment.
- Keep the process simple.
- Be prayerful.
- Keep asking: "What does God want?"<sup>10</sup>

Through prayer, we seek to tap into the Spirit for deeper level understanding and for divine perspective to assess our circumstances, the needs of those around us, and the opportunities God may be placing before us. To these ends, we ask the Spirit to speak to us through Scripture, to give us wisdom as we apply reason, to help us see what we need to see, to bring to mind relevant experiences in our lives that could be instructive now, and to give us a Christ-centered perspective. The Spirit also helps us know how to weight the various inputs we are receiving (such as, Scripture, tradition, rational arguments, individual and group experience, prophecies, etc.), and provides creative, timely, or fresh perspective.

### **Trust God to lead and guide<sup>11</sup>**

In this final section, we will briefly consider a few additional psychological and spiritual factors that influence a leader's ability to make good, Spirit-led decisions. Effective Christian

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<sup>9</sup> Graham Standish, *Becoming the Blessed Church* (BBC), p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Standish, *Becoming the Blessed Church* (BBC), pp. 61, 63f.

<sup>11</sup> This section is an expansion of my short essay, "Expect God to be at work in your life, leading and guiding you," posted on my blog site, [www.spirit-leader.com](http://www.spirit-leader.com) (April 13, 2020): <https://spirit-ledleader.com/2020/04/13/what-can-we-expect-from-god-now-spiritual-truth-2/>.

leaders must avoid becoming reactionary in the midst of a crisis or stressful decision-making process. They will refrain from responding impulsively or irrationally and will instead remain grounded in their connection to the Spirit and their faith in God's leading and guiding.

*Fear, reactivity, and tough COVID-19 related decisions—a personal story*

In early March of this year, the COVID-19 crisis was mounting globally. No confirmed cases were yet reported in Myanmar, but the novel coronavirus was starting to spread throughout the world and heading toward my home state in Minnesota. I was in Yangon, preparing for a month of ministry to approximately 200 pastors in three weeklong workshops, in Mandalay, Kanpetlet (Southern Chin State), and Sittwe (Rakhine State), respectively. What should I do? Should I play it safe and get out of the country immediately? What was the most loving thing to do, as a husband and father? What was the most responsible thing to do as a minister and teacher? Should I press on to conduct these workshops for the sake of these pastors, who had been counting on this training for themselves and the benefit of the churches they serve—or get home, ASAP?

I felt I was in a no-win bind. As I considered each option, I felt guilty for not choosing the other. It was not just a matter of priorities, though. It was a conflict among my highest values. Of course, my wife's well-being was more important than my job, and I realized that if I got sick and died, I would not be able to do any ministry for anyone anymore; but we all know that making decisions is often not as simple as listing priorities in order. Due to lack of information, I could not adequately assess the risks. How much did my family need me? How great was the risk of my getting sick if I stayed? Was it riskier to travel among thousands of people in multiple airports and on four planes than to just stay put? How great was the risk that the airports, borders,



and flights would all shut down and I wouldn't be able to get home for many months? Was a compromise possible? And what was best for the pastors who had to travel long distances just to get to the workshops, and who might put each other at risk in a group setting?

In retrospect, the answers seem clearer. But at the time, as is often the case in the midst of impending crisis and uncertainty, the "right" choices are not so obvious. In this situation, for me, the values of caring for my family, protecting my own health, and fulfilling my ministry commitments and responsibilities were in raging conflict within me.

For many of us, we pray for guidance in such circumstances, but the answers don't always come readily. Our inner turmoil makes us feel anxious or confused. If the crisis is big enough, instead of making a Spirit-led decision, a fight, flight, or freeze response might kick in. That is, we may boldly ignore the danger and attack the problem head-on but may do so blindly or foolishly. Or, we may run away as fast as we can, only to discover later that we had panicked. The danger was not as great as we feared, and we missed the opportunity to serve those who were counting on us. Or, we may become so anxious that we freeze, unable to make any decision; but by our indecision we fail to make a measured, wise, timely response. Any one of these fight, flight, or freeze instincts may be quite common and natural to us, and sometimes even helpful in times of danger; but they are also irrational and can get in the way of making good, Spirit-led decisions.

### *Trusting God throughout the process*

As my wife, staff members, ministry partners and I agonized over these questions, the Holy Spirit reminded me that I needed to trust God to guide us in our decision-making. Instead of having to bearing all the weight of these unanswered questions on my shoulders, I felt relieved

remembering that I was not alone in this anxious time of uncertainty. God was there to help. I needed to believe it, and act like it. Solomon put it this way nearly 3000 years ago: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV).

If we rely (exclusively) on our own wisdom and understanding in times of crisis or difficult decision-making, we may easily misread the situation or jump to the wrong conclusions. The biblical path of discernment, in contrast, leans heavily on God as leader and guide. First, we are told to “acknowledge” the Lord God in all our ways—that is, we have to slow down, humble ourselves, and surrender our will to God’s. Then, we must “trust in the Lord with all our hearts,” meaning, we must rely on the Holy Spirit to lead and guide as we proceed with gathering information and weighing our options. Clearly, this kind of trust is not passive. It’s involves actively reaching out to God for wisdom to see things clearly and to better perceive what cannot be seen with our eyes or minds alone. It is only through this kind of God-centered discernment process that we can hope to make the best decisions. James talks about the process this way:

If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. James 1:5-6  
NRSV

It’s not our circumstances that make us unstable, it’s our lack of faith. In times of crisis, Spirit-led decision-makers do not abandon reliance on God, who is often more silent than they might like. Rather, they *both* take responsibility to assess the situation, seek help in discerning the best course of action, and then make thoughtful (not impulsive, irrational) decisions when they need to *and* simultaneously trust that God is very much present and active to lead and guide them, often behind the scenes, so-to-speak.

This *both-and approach* requires creating enough space to quiet ourselves and take time to listen for the Spirit's voice through Scripture and prayer. We will reach out to reliable spiritual guides, pastors, mentors, co-workers, and friends for input. We will not try to push our way forward, regardless of warning signs. Neither will we run away out of fear, unless we must protect ourselves from imminent danger. We also will not get stuck, frozen, unwilling to think things through and make a rational decision in a timely manner. We will fix our eyes on Jesus, considering his example of faith and sacrificial service in setting our priorities (Hebrews 12:1-2). We will trust God with our whole heart, and then take action when as the way forward becomes clearer.

#### *Finding answers over time*

Eventually, more information became available to me in Myanmar, and the answers finally emerged, one at a time.

- First, fighting in Rakhine State made the roads impassable for the pastors and too dangerous for us. The decision to postpone the third workshop was made for us before the first one even began.
- At the same time, I felt an increasing confidence and peace to go forward to conduct the first two scheduled workshops.
- The Mandalay workshop went well, with very positive results among the 56 pastors.
- We then traveled to Bagan, increasingly ill-at-ease, but prepared to make the 5 hour drive up into the Chin Hills. The government was starting to prohibit mass meetings, but it seemed the door was still open for us to conduct the second workshop. However, as we met with our liaison in Bagan to make a final decision, we learned that one of the

buildings owned by the General Secretary of the Kanpetlet Association, the man in charge of overseeing the logistics of caring for 75 pastors for the week, burned down the day before. He was willing to try to make the event work, but this would have been too much to ask of someone in crisis. We had our answer.<sup>12</sup>

March in Myanmar reassured me again that God does indeed lead and guide amid upsetting and confusing circumstances. I had to stay fully engaged in the decision-making process, and I had to manage my fight-flight-freeze types of impulses so that they didn't take over. Yet, the more I kept putting the workshops and decisions into God's hands, and the more I was willing to listen for the quiet voice of the Spirit and listen to the voices of others around me, the more I was able to hear what I needed to hear and to see what I needed to see. Over time, answers emerged.

The final itinerary was different from any of the scenarios I was first considering, but the result was 12 Spirit-blessed days in Myanmar and a timely return to my family afterward. Graduation week at MIT was full of meaningful connections and ministry. Our staff conducted the *Spirit-Led Leadership* workshop in Mandalay, as planned, with very good results. Then, as doors began closing, lockdowns were being discussed in the USA, flights were being canceled, and circumstances suddenly changed again (civil war and unexpected crises), it was time to go home. I arrived back into the loving arms of my wife, Jill, three weeks early. I felt grateful for how God had worked through the ministry while in Myanmar, peaceful about letting two workshops go for now, and equally assured that home was where I now needed to be.

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<sup>12</sup> Unbeknownst to us at the time we decided to postpone the workshop, the local authorities were on the verge of banning all group meetings anyway. Had we traveled to Kanpetlet, we would have been prevented from conducting the workshop. God had led us to the right decision, even though we didn't know about the ban.

## Conclusions

All individuals and leaders must face many tough decisions in their lifetimes. When the time comes, they need to be ready for the challenge—or at least have a thoughtful plan for how they are going to get ready. In each situation, mature leaders will properly assess what kind of decision needs to be made and what information and resources are needed in order to reach the best possible decision. In non-urgent circumstances, leaders will create a solid discernment process, i.e., a step by step plan to reach a decision, including who needs to be involved in the process, when, and to what extent. Above all, in order to make a good, Spirit-led decision, leaders will actively draw upon the Holy Spirit throughout the discernment process and will invite others to seek God's will together with them. They will avoid reacting with a fight, flight, or freeze response when they feel overstressed. Instead, they will stay grounded in their faith and connection to God, while following a thoughtful discernment process with the goal of reaching the best possible, Spirit-led decision they can.

What kind of discernment process are you using right now as you make important decisions, explore new options, or address pressing problems or challenges in your personal life, family, church, ministry, or some other leadership role? You will never have enough knowledge and wisdom to make perfect decisions in every situation, but you can grow significantly in your ability to make good, Spirit-led decisions in a wide variety of circumstances. Actively create and follow a thoughtful process of discernment; act reasonably (instead of reacting irrationally) when you're overstressed; open your heart and mind to the needs, feelings, and input of others; continually reach out to the Holy Spirit in prayer; then trust God to lead and guide you throughout the process, even if you can't always sense his presence or prompting from day to day. This is what it takes to be a thoughtful, Spirit-led follower of Christ and Christian leader.

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