



Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage (Part IV of V) “Decision Making”

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“Decision Making”

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What Can I Hope to Get From this Seminar?

Whether you are here due to personal need, the needs of others, or for a general interest in the topic, we hope this seminar will benefit you. If we do our job well, parts of this seminar will speak to you personally. There will also be parts that speak to aspects of this subject that are different from your own experience. What follows are **six unavoidable facts** that should help you profit from all of the material you hear (bold faced text taken from Paul Tripp and Tim Lane *How People Change*):

1. Someone in your life had a problem this week. That person may be you. Even if you are here for yourself, chances are you know or will know others who struggle in this area. Because we live in a fallen world and have a sin nature, we can be certain that we will battle with sin and suffering in our lives. Because we love people, we can be certain we will be called on to love and assist others in their battle with sin and suffering.

2. We have everything we need in the Gospel to help that person (2 Peter 1:3). God has given us Himself, the Gospel, the Bible, and the church and promised they are effective for all things that pertain to life and godliness. Our task as Christians is to grow in our understanding of and ability to skillfully apply these resources to our struggles. These resources are the essence and source of "good advice," and we hope to play a role in your efforts to apply and disseminate this "good advice." We do not aim to present new material, but new ways of applying the timeless, eternal truths of the Gospel found in Scripture.

3. That person will seek help from friends, family members, or pastors before seeking professionals. Counseling (broadly defined as seeking to offer hope and direction through relationship) happens all the time. We talk with friends over the phone, crying children in their rooms, spouses in the kitchen, fellow church members between services, and have endless conversations with ourselves. We listen to struggles, seek to understand, offer perspective, give advice, and follow up later. This is what the New Testament calls "one-anothering" and something we are all called to do.

4. That person either got no help, bad help, or biblical, gospel-centered help. Not all counseling is good counseling. Not all advice that we receive from a Christian (even a Christian counselor) is Christian advice. Too often we are advised to look within for the answers to our problems or told that we are good enough, strong enough, or smart enough in ourselves to overcome. Hopefully you will see today how the Bible calls us to something (rather Someone) better, bigger, and more effective than these messages.

5. If they did not get meaningful help, they will go elsewhere. When we do not receive good advice (pointing us to enduring life transformation), we keep looking. We need answers to our struggles. This means that as people find unfulfilling answers they will eventually (by God's grace) come to a Christian for advice. When they eventually come to you, we hope you will be more prepared because of our time together today.

6. Whatever help they received, they will use to help others! We become evangelists for the things that make life better (this is why the Gospel is simply called "Good News"). We quite naturally share the things that we find to be effective. Our prayer for you today is that you will find the material presented effective for your struggles and that you will be so comforted and encouraged by it that it will enable you to be a more passionate and effective ambassador of the Gospel in the midst of "normal" daily conversations.

Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage Mentoring Series

This seminar is one piece of a five part series of seminars designed to facilitate mentoring relationships for married or engaged couples (one-on-one or in a group setting). Our goal in these seminars is to cover the key subjects that often hinder, but could greatly enhance, a couple’s ability to experience all that God intended marriage to be.

We believe that change that lasts happens in relationship. Private change tends to be short-lived change. Living things exposed to light grow. Living things kept in the dark wither. This is why we designed this series to encourage you to give your marriage the light of Christian community by studying these materials with others.

These materials are built upon a central premise – God gave us marriage so that we would know the gospel more clearly and more personally. It is the gospel that gives us joy. Marriage is meant to be a living picture of the gospel-relationship between God and His bride, the church. For this reason, we have two goals for you as you go through this study:

1. That you would get to know and enjoy your spouse in exciting, new, and profoundly deeper ways, so that...
2. ... you would get to know and enjoy God in exciting, new, and profoundly deeper ways.

This series of seminars is arranged around five topics that represent the most common challenges that face a marriage. While the challenges of each area are acknowledged, the tone of these seminars is optimistic. We believe that those things that cause the greatest pain when done wrongly bring the fullest joy when done according to God’s design.

These seminars are both sequential and interdependent. Each seminar is meant to build upon the ones before it and lead into the ones after it. If you are going through these materials for general marital enrichment or pre-marital counseling, it is best to complete them in order. However, if you are looking for guidance in a particular area of need, it is possible to start with the subject of greatest urgency in your marriage.

1. Foundations: Why is marriage hard? Why do so many marriages that begin in sincere love end in divorce? What are the essential things a couple should focus on to have a marriage that flourishes? What is a covenant and why is marriage a covenant? Why do we have a marriage ceremony? What are the roles for a Christian husband and wife? What if I don’t “fit” or like the masculine-feminine stereotypes or don’t have the personality to match a “traditional” husband/wife?

2. Communication: What does a couple talk about over a life time? What if I’m not good with words or listening? How do we maintain friendship when we’re having to keep up with so many logistics? How do we disagree and protect our marriage without losing what’s important to each of us individually? Why do words matter so much and why can they hurt so badly? How do we make things right after they go wrong and not let negative momentum build?

3. Finances: Why are money problems the number one cause of divorce? How do we maintain reasonable expectations for money in a debt-sick culture? How do two people manage their money together when it is hard enough to manage as a single person? Who should administrate the finances and how involved should the other person be? How do we learn self-control and contentment as a couple? How can “budget” become an exciting or, at least, pleasant word?

4. Decision Making: How do we manage our time? How do we navigate situations where we each want good things that cannot both happen? How do we determine God’s will for our personal and marital lives? How do we functionally express the biblical roles of headship and submission? How do we ensure that life’s tough decisions draw us closer to God and each other instead of creating distance? How do we respond when bad things happen to a good marriage or our plans?

5. Intimacy: How do you maintain the “spark” of marriage over a lifetime? How do you continue learning each other without feeling like you know all there is to know? How do we protect our expectations from highly romanticized cultural ideals? How many ways are there to express love and why are they all necessary? How do we enjoy a balance of both intimacy and intercourse? How do we grow as lovers throughout our marriage?

Evaluation:

Personal Decision Making

Note: Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

Instructions: Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

1. We share a common desire to honor God in all we do with our life.	CD SD NS SA CA
2. We agree on what it means to honor God in all we do with our life.	CD SD NS SA CA
3. We share a common understanding of what "a successful life" would mean.	CD SD NS SA CA
4. We accept that joy and fulfillment do not exist apart from a God-honoring life.	CD SD NS SA CA
5. We think about God's heart for the world when we make family decisions.	CD SD NS SA CA
6. I am aware of my strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies when making decisions.	CD SD NS SA CA
7. My spouse is aware of his/her strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies in making decisions.	CD SD NS SA CA
8. I process my personal-emotional struggles in a healthy and wise manner.	CD SD NS SA CA
9. My spouse processes his/her personal-emotional struggles in a healthy and wise manner.	CD SD NS SA CA
10. I can make decisions without fear or excessive "what if" thinking.	CD SD NS SA CA
11. My spouse can make decisions without fear or excessive "what if" thinking.	CD SD NS SA CA
12. I do not have a desire or activity that impedes our ability to make wise decisions.	CD SD NS SA CA
13. My spouse does not have a desire or activity that prevents us from making wise decisions.	CD SD NS SA CA
14. I resist being impulsive in decisions that would be harmful to our marriage.	CD SD NS SA CA
15. My spouse resists being impulsive in decisions that would be harmful to our marriage.	CD SD NS SA CA
16. We believe that God wants to make His will known and doesn't play "hard to get."	CD SD NS SA CA
17. Our first priority in decision making is to glorify God.	CD SD NS SA CA
18. Our second priority in decision making is to avoid sin.	CD SD NS SA CA
19. Our third priority in decision making is to pursue what God says to pursue.	CD SD NS SA CA
20. Outside of these priorities we believe we have freedom to choose based on preference.	CD SD NS SA CA
21. We pray together about significant decisions.	CD SD NS SA CA
22. I believe I know how to use the Bible in guiding my decision making.	CD SD NS SA CA
23. I believe my spouse knows how to use the Bible in guiding his/her decision making.	CD SD NS SA CA
24. I humbly seek the guidance of others when making a decision.	CD SD NS SA CA
25. My spouse humbly seeks the guidance of others when making a decision.	CD SD NS SA CA
26. My spouse trusts those with whom I seek counsel in making decisions.	CD SD NS SA CA
27. I trust those with whom my spouse seeks counsel in making decisions.	CD SD NS SA CA
28. I resist making decisions just to please others at the expense of my marriage.	CD SD NS SA CA
29. My spouse resists making decisions just to please others at the expense of our marriage.	CD SD NS SA CA
30. We evaluate significant decisions to learn how we can improve as decision makers.	CD SD NS SA CA

Key to Survey Scoring: For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the "neutral" NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD	-	Negative 3 points	SA	-	Positive 1 points
SD	-	Negative 2 points	CA	-	Positive 2 points
NS	-	Negative 1 point			

If your total score...

- ...**matches or exceeds the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...**is less than the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...**is a negative number**, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-5: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions examines the "**decision making agenda**" necessary for a gospel-centered marriage. We often get distracted and confused in decision making because we lose sight of the overarching agenda of our lives.

Recommended Resources: *The Cross-Centered Life* by C.J. Mahaney, *Desiring God* by John Piper

➤ Questions 6-15: (Total: _____ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the "**temptations of decision**" to be avoided for a gospel-centered marriage. Our decision making is the battle ground on which the vast majority of spiritual warfare is fought. If we know and address our weaknesses (personally and martially) in decision making, it prepares us to "stand firm" (Eph. 6:13) against the majority of things Satan would use to disrupt or destroy our marriage.

Recommended Resources: *The Enemy Within* by Kris Lungaard

➤ Questions 16-20: (Total: _____ in 5 questions)

This set of questions examines the "**beliefs and priorities for decision making**" necessary for a gospel-centered marriage. What we believe about God and how He reveals His will for our life determines how we make decisions.

Recommended Resources: *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will* by Kevin DeYoung

➤ Questions 21-30: (Total: _____ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the "**the process of personal decision making**" necessary for a gospel-centered marriage. Right beliefs about God's will still require a process of implementation, especially in cases where there is no clear right-wrong or even wise-unwise criteria to eliminate all the available options.

Recommended Resources: *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians* by James C. Petty

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse's effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

_____ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score questions 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 22, 24, 26, and 28.

_____ **Spouse's Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for questions 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, and 29.

Chapter I

What Makes Decision Making Hard?

The Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Things We Rarely Discuss

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- The process of decision making will affect your marriage as much, if not more, than what you decide.
- Life and marriage are too complex for one approach to decision making.
- Even the most biblical approach to decision making will not remove the presence of risk or the need for faith.
- The gospel does not excuse bad decisions; it gives us the grace we need to learn and recover from them.

Memorize: I Thessalonians 4:1 and 3 (ESV), “Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you may do so more and more... For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Ask and urge” – Paul’s point in this passage carries an urgency he believed merited more than a request.
- “Ought to walk” – The Bible uses the work “walk” to refer to our way of life: day-to-day decision making.
- “More and more” – God’s will is something that should be able to increase in our lives; not just a line we stay on.
- “This is the will of God” – This is the clearest and most direct statement regarding God’s will for Christians.
- “Your sanctification” – God’s primary concern in our decisions is our character more than the outcomes.

Teaching Notes

“Life is wide open and filled with endless possibilities, but with this sense of opportunity comes confusion, anxiety, and indecision. With everything I could do and everywhere I could go, how can I know what’s what? Enter a passion to discern ‘God’s will for my life.’ That’s a key reason there is always a market for books about the will of God (p. 14-15)... ” Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

“‘What is God’s will for my life?’ is not the best question to ask. I think the right question is simply ‘What is God’s will?’ Once I know God’s will, then I can adjust my life to Him and His purposes.... The focus needs to be on God and His purposes, not my life! (p. 18)” Henry Blackaby in *Experiencing God*

“If guidance comes from wisdom and wisdom is the application of values to life, then our culture – despite its great technological knowledge – cannot provide real guidance (p. 24).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

“I’m convinced that previous generations did not struggle like we do trying to discover God’s will because they didn’t have as many choices. In many ways, our preoccupation with the will of God is a Western, middle-class phenomenon of the last fifty years (p. 32-33).” Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

“Decide” comes from the Latin word *decidere* which means “to cut off”

“The focus of the Bible is God. The essence of sin is a shift from God-centered to a self-centered life. The essence of salvation is a denial of self... When this happens, God can accomplish through us the purposes He had before He created the world (p. 63).” Henry Blackaby in *Experiencing God*

Embedded Study

Trying to learn how to make decisions, as an individual or as a couple, can feel a bit like trying to learn how to breathe. It seems like something that has to be natural in order to be effective. If we had to think about breathing, then we'd fear getting distracted and suffocating. When we think about being intentional in our decision making it can quickly feel like such an effort would take over our lives.

There is good deal of merit to this concern. If we tried to bring overt thought and prescribe processes to every individual or marital decision in order to ensure that we arrived at the will of God, then our lives would be paralyzed. We would live in fear or fail to complete a large number of tasks that life requires.

But we've all been burned by the alternative. After a bad decision we put on our "20/20 Hindsight Glasses" and see how greater intentionality could have alleviated the unpleasant outcome. We begin to think it would be "worth it" to run our decisions through some kind of process. But it's hard to determine what level of decision warrants this process (where's "the line"?) and what kind of process to use for each decision.

These challenges emerge before we introduce the difficulty of two-party decision making required in marriage. It is hard enough to answer these questions as an individual, but they are multiplied when married couples must both agree (mental consent) and cooperate (logistical follow through) on decisions.

These are the challenges we are tackling in this seminar. In order to address these challenges, we will divide decision making into three arenas. Too often, couples try to force all decision making to fit into one or two of these arenas. They may do this for convenience (but simple becomes simplistic) or conviction (emphasizing some part of what Scripture teaches to the neglect of other parts). Either way, their life lacks balance and begins to show the corresponding wear-and-tear.

1. **Personal Decision Making (Disciple; Eph. 5:15-17):** The foundation of a healthy couple is two individuals committed to wise personal decision making. We must be a faithful disciple of Christ before we will be a good husband/wife to our spouse. It is neither possible nor advisable for a couple to consult each other on every decision they make. Shared values, agreed upon life structures (i.e., calendar and budget), and appreciation for what is important to each other comprise the foundation of personal decision making that will bless a marriage. We will discuss how to approach personal decision making in chapters two and three.
2. **Consensus Decision Making (Friends; Eph. 5:21):** Another large portion of marital decisions will be made as friends through the process of consensus. This is how two individuals begin to shape "our life" together that represents the new "we" more than the individual "me's." As a couple grows in their knowledge and sacrifice for another, this arena of decision making should become the significant majority of their shared decision making. Consensus should be the default approach to decision making throughout marriage. How to approach consensus decision making will be discussed in chapter four.
3. **Corporate Decision Making (Headship-Submission; Eph. 5:22-31):** Not all decisions can be made through consensus. Couples will not agree on every decision. Some decisions do not allow for a "middle ground" because of limited options. How and when to engage the headship-submission style of decision making will be discussed in chapter five. But a brief preface will be made here. The fact that God gives husbands the role of headship in these kinds of decisions does not mean the husband must/should choose his preference in each instance. While the final call does belong to the husband, it is an unwise husband who always calls his own number.

Before we take this journey, take a moment to reflect. Knowing where you want to go is only helpful if you know where you are. The three points above tell us where we want to get with this seminar, but use the remainder of this chapter to assess where you and your spouse are beginning this journey.

Put Yourself Into Words

What are your concerns, fears, or challenges regarding decision making? Before you read any more of somebody else's thoughts on the subject, use the questions below to put yourself into words. How do you frame the challenges and your questions regarding decision making – both as an individual and as part of a marriage?

What are your ideals for marital decision making? _____

What are your fears about how decision making will go or has gone in your marriage? _____

What would you define as the greatest challenges you've faced in decision making? _____

20 Things that Makes Decision Making Hard

1. **"God's will" has several different meanings, even in the Bible.** Few things are more confusing than trying to have a conversation in which a single word has multiple meanings. Many humorous (and some agitating) conversations probably come to mind. That is what we face, even within Scripture, with the phrase "God's will." It is used in several different ways.

We will discuss three key ways the Bible uses this phrase is used in chapter two. Use this opportunity to think of conversations or personal questions that you have had which may have been hard to resolve because the same word was being used to describe multiple different things.

Couple Discussion Questions: Do you and your spouse use the phrase "God's will" in the same way? Has confusion about what "God's will" means led to anxiety, frustration, or despair for you personally and, if so, how?

2. **We started making decisions long before we started thinking... biblically.** With habits, especially habits of thought, precedence (going first) has a significant impact. All of us started making decisions long before we started thinking about how to make decisions; which also preceded any attempt to make decisions biblically. This precedence impacts how we make decisions now, even when we try to be guided by Scripture.

The bulk of our early decision making, which still has a large impact, is personality. If we are naturally analytical or were raised to be analytical, we likely look to the principles of Scripture to guide our decisions. If we are experiential, then we likely rely on the feelings or "beyond coincidence" experiences we have while reading Scripture to confirm our decisions. If we dislike authority, then we likely bristle when Scripture guides our decision making even when we know God's way is right.

Couple Discussion Questions: When you think about your opportunities and experiences of decision making as a child, how do you think that impacts your current decision making? How does your personality impact how you use or don't use Scripture in decision making? What decisions are you prone to make "without thinking" that could (or have) negatively impacted your marriage?

3. **We have to make more decisions than we can study scripturally and logistically.** In whatever way Scripture speaks to each decision we make (more on that in upcoming challenges), we don't always have time to study and gather extensive information on every decision. Whatever model we adopt for decision making (as an individual and/or couple), we will not always have time to implement it as well as we would like.

This is the problem with most material on decision making (at least those who which do not tell you to merely "go with your feelings"). There is some amount of process, consultation, or research that is not always possible. Giving certain decisions the attention they deserve will rob other decisions of the attention they deserve. We can even lose our time to make decisions as we decide which decisions deserve our decision making attention.

Couple Discussion Questions: How much do you trust yourself and your spouse in decisions that have to be made "in the moment"? Which of you tends to use "in the moment" decision making as an excuse for lazy decision making? What tendencies do you most need to be aware of in how you make "in the moment" decisions?

4. **Little decisions feed the big decisions and we don't see it.** Rarely do we think of what we can't buy because of a purchase we are currently making. We don't see how trips for coffee cost us the money we would use to take our spouse on a date. Similarly, we often fail to see the cumulative impact "small choices" have on "big choices."

Our tendency as people is to nickel and dime ourselves out of the opportunity for the really significant and enjoyable opportunities. We say "yes" to so many little things we can't say "yes" to the big ones. Rarely do we think of time and energy as commodities we must steward in the same way we know we should steward money (whether we actually budget or not).

Couple Discussion Questions: Are you more prone to sacrifice tomorrow for today or today for tomorrow? How can you, as a couple, ensure you don't nickel and dime yourself (time or money) out of having the freedom to make important decisions? What commodities (i.e., time, energy, money, etc...) are you most prone to lose track of and, thereby, restrict your ability to make important decisions?

5. **We never know “what would have happened.”** The most basic form of learning is trial-and-error. But for many, maybe most, decisions in which we want to know God's will, we don't know the alternative outcome by which we could measure our decision. We don't know what would have happened if... we took the other job, chose to go to the other school, bought the other house, etc...

Because “time stops for no man (or woman)” we never get to empirically verify our choice was “best” (or even “better”) than the alternatives. We are hypothetical creatures (having the ability and strong desire to ask “what if” questions) living lives that are purely linear (the hands of time never go backwards). This means we entertain many questions we'll never be able to answer until we step out of time and into eternity (what we call “death”).

Couple Discussion Questions: How strong is your desire that life were like a youth edition choose-your-own-adventure book (giving you the ability to know what would have happened)? Does the intensity of this desire cause you to lean more towards fear or apathy about decision making? In the absence of measuring decisions by their alternative outcomes, what standards have you developed for measuring decisions?

6. **Unbiblical approaches sometimes “work” for a while.** The contrast in approaches to decision making is not ineffective (worldly) versus effective (biblical). Often principles of decision making taught in the world are consistent with what Scripture teaches; Scripture is practical and a pragmatic world will borrow from whatever works. Other times the world will abuse power to achieve an outcome and it seems like they “win” by force – “unbiblical effectiveness.”

It is in these times that, as Christians, we may feel like we are at a competitive disadvantage. But this is the plot line of most comic books. When the “bad guy” is about to get caught he takes someone hostage and places them in harm's way. The “hero” is forced to choose whether to save the girl or catch the criminal. He saves the girl and the criminal gets away. In spite of what was “effective” and “ineffective,” we still admire the hero and disdain the villain.

Couple Discussion Questions: Where in your life are you exposed to unbiblical approaches to decision making that “work” for a while? How is this discouraging or tempting to you and how can your spouse support you? Where do you see secular people adopting biblical approaches to decision making and how does their lack of commitment to Christ change the results (II Tim. 3:5)?

7. **We can do everything we're “supposed” to do and things may still go badly.** Godly decision making cannot be viewed as an insurance policy against hardships in life. God does not promise to protect us from the storms of life, but in and through the storms of life. The disappointment and disorientation when hardship follows good decisions are often what causes many people to believe God is not worth following.

Even when hardship does not provoke someone to surrender their faith, it can be a time when the question, “What did I do wrong?” enters our lives. Hardship becomes the catalyst for false guilt or insecurity. It is appropriate to consider whether hardship was connected to unwise decisions. But if we assume our hardships are necessarily caused by our choices then we become like “Job's counselors” (one of the main lessons in the book of Job is that all suffering is not connected to moral failure or poor choices; God inspired a 42 chapter book to repudiate this assumption).

Couple Discussion Questions: When are the occasions in your life that you made good choices and still faced hardship? How does this impact the way you approach decision making and, thereby, your marriage? What false beliefs about yourself, God, and life have you taken from those experiences that God would want to use your marriage to free you from?

8. **Often there is no “right answer.”** Often we seek God's guidance for decisions where He grants us the freedom of preference. We begin to fixate on making the “right” decision on choices that are not moral decisions. This results in us feeling paralyzed, like God is silent, or mistaking superstitious approaches to decision making as God's guidance.

One of the primary responsibilities in decision making is dividing the moral from non-moral aspects of a decision. Spending more than you can afford for a house or car is immoral. Which house or car you purchase within your budget is purely a matter of wisdom (what meets your family needs best) and preference (which one will you enjoy the most). When we fail to make this distinction we can begin to feel subjectively “lead to” things that God would objectively “lead us away from.”

Couple Discussion Questions: Does it make you uncomfortable to think that for non-moral decisions there is no “right answer”? How good are each of you individually and as a couple at dividing the moral and non-moral aspects of a decision? How does each of your over/under utilizing the category of moral decisions affect your relationship?

9. **Scriptural absolutes sometimes contradict or crowd out each other (or, at least, seem to).** There are over 600 commands in the Bible. While we can boil them down to the “top ten” (10 Commandments) or “big two” (love God and love neighbor), if we take Scripture seriously we will find there are more opportunities to obey than there is time in the day.

Even the 30+ “one another commands” of the New Testament, which describe how we are to relate to our fellow Christians, would be exhausting if we felt compelled to do everyone everyday or even at every opportunity. How do we honor the things Scripture commands while doing other good-necessary things (i.e., playing with kids, exercise, going the grocery, etc...)? This will be discussed further in chapter three.

Couple Discussion Questions: When you think about all the commands of Scripture are you more prone to “do” yourself into exhaustion or to ignore what feels impossible? How do you deal with competing expectations from God or other relationships? How does your willingness to pray to God when you’re overwhelmed by Him correspond with your willingness to talk with your spouse when you feel overwhelmed with him/her/life?

10. **Recreating or avoiding parent’s model instead of pursuing God’s model.** Most people have things about their parents which makes them roll their eyes. The problem with knowing clearly how we don’t want to do something is that it leaves us susceptible to many other unhealthy ways of attempting it. Similarly, what was good or effective for your parent’s marriage may not fit your marriage.

If you grew up in a yelling home, avoidance may look appealing. If you grew up in a controlling home, then the absence of planning may feel safe. Errors tend to come in opposite pairs with peace located in the middle (not at either end of the spectrum). Yet in our pain or anger we often assume the other end of the spectrum “has to be better than this.”

Couple Discussion Questions: How does your family experience growing up impact your expectations of making decisions as a couple in marriage? What are the “one end of the spectrum” things that each of you are prone to react against in your decision making? What are your best examples (clearest, funniest, etc...) of missing the middle for the opposite extreme?

11. **In marriage there are different types/modes of decision making.** How do you contain water? The answer is, “It depends on whether it is in its liquid, vapor, or ice form.” How should married couples make decisions? The answer is, “It depends on whether the decision is best suited for individual, consensus, or headship-submission decision making.”

Just like we assume “water” always means “liquid” (when it actually only means H₂O), we often assume marital decision making should always mean whichever mode of marital decision making comes most natural or seems ideal to us. When this happens it results in couples making certain decisions well (those that fit their instincts) and other decisions poorly.

Couple Discussion Questions: When each of you hear “marital decision making” what type of process comes to mind? When have the two of you used a good process of decision making that was a bad fit for that decision? When you think of matching the right type of decision making to a decision does it feel tedious, exciting, complicated, etc...?

12. **My desires compete with each other; not to mention my spouse’s.** The kind of decisions we struggle with are when saying “yes” to one good desire means saying “no” to another. It’s wonderful when we can find the often elusive win-win. But, if we’re honest, we’ll realize that our own desires compete with each other (i.e., to be thin and eat, to save money and have nice things). That’s true before we introduce a second person to the conversation.

Another version of this challenge is when a couple disagrees on what “success” means in the decision making process. If one spouse’s primary concern is safety and the other’s is opportunity, then they will approach a decision about a job change, major purchase, or alteration in children’s lifestyle very differently. Yet, frequently those competing definitions of “success,” can exist within the same person.

Couple Discussion Questions: How often do you feel conflicted over two competing desires you have for the same decision? How do your internal conflicts affect your marital communication? When you and your spouse’s desires compete can you and your spouse stay on the same team?

13. **The amount of time we have to make decisions varies greatly.** Sometimes it feels like we have too little time to make a decision. Whatever process we have in place gets short-circuited. Other times it feels like we have too much time to make a decision. Then we second guess ourselves into paralysis or ulcers.

Along with time, there is also the opportunity, or lack thereof, to talk with each other when a decision needs to be made. While good life planning should minimize these occurrences, there will be times when what should be joint decisions have to be made by one spouse.

Couple Discussion Questions: If you had to choose, would you prefer to have too much or too little time to make an important decision? What areas of character would you need to grow in for your spouse to be more comfortable in these moments? What areas of life management do you, as a couple, need to pay more attention to in order to avoid too many rushed decisions?

14. **Managing life together and making decision can detract from the romance of marriage.** It can often feel like “no” is the least romantic word in the English language. Any decision making this side of “Never-Never Land” requires saying no to things we want. That is at odds with romance – “I want to give you the world and the moon too.”

It is important that decision making not be all that a couple does. Otherwise, marriage begins to feel like a business venture. There are several keys to avoiding this dynamic: having meaningful day-to-day communication, seeing the bonding nature of mutual sacrifice, and having a process of decision making that “works” so you protect time for the other forms of communication.

Couple Discussion Questions: How well do your approaches to marital decision making protect the bonding aspects of your marriage? Can you hear a warranted “no” to one of your legitimate desires and still feel close to and loved by your spouse? Does your “neediness” for romance or aversion to conflict contribute to poor decision making?

15. **We are making today’s decisions while executing yesterday’s and preparing for tomorrow’s.** We live at the intersection of three time zones of decisions: past, present, and future. That is like juggling three objects of different sizes, shapes, and weight (executing, deciding, and preparing). Juggling (like decision making) is hard enough when all three objects are the same. But remember, this is a the reality in which we live; not an additional skill be recommended by this seminar.

Your personality or temperament is likely to prefer one of these time zones of decision making to the others. Certain emotional proclivities also prefer focusing on certain time zones (i.e., anger, the past; anxiety, the future). So beyond the general challenge of keeping track of three parts decision making, we also battle our own preferences; which often aren’t bad, but account for our strengths and weaknesses in decision making?

Couple Discussion Questions: Which of the three time zones of decision making are each of you best/worst at (executing past decisions, making present decisions, or preparing for future decisions)? How do your dominant emotions impact or correlate with which time zone that dominates your thinking? How does a preference for same / different time zones affect your marital communication and decision making?

16. **Past hurts and future fear can easily cause us to misinterpret the present.** Decision making does not occur in an emotional vacuum. There is no “just the facts, Ma’am” approach to decision making by people with emotions (even the most reserved of us are not Dr. Spok).

When we’ve been hurt “wisdom” begins to be shaped by “anything different from what hurt me” and “folly” is “anything similar.” But that interpretive bias can make our decision making process very volatile, inconsistent (as hurts compound with each reaction), and ultimately despairing.

The same bias can occur with our successes. We begin to define “wisdom” as “something like that worked before” and “folly” as “anything different.” Experience should guide our decision making, but as a litmus test it can make us simultaneously restricted and reactive in our choices.

Couple Discussion Questions: What fears or successes most impact the way that each of you approach decision making? When have you seen these experiences negatively impact how you approached a decision? How well do the two of you talk about the impact of past experiences on present decisions?

17. **Sometimes good decisions get executed poorly and wind up looking bad.** Outcomes are not the only verification of wisdom. Consider how many good decisions get derailed by poor follow through. If we are not careful, when this happens we think, “We tried what we ‘should’ do and ‘it didn’t work.’” From that point forward we think poor follow through rendered godly wisdom ineffective for us.

As we evaluate decisions, we need to assess both the choice and the execution of the choice. Did we communicate well about what each person needed to do? Did we have reminders in place for key pieces of the plan? Did we give the effort necessary to accomplish what we set out to do? These questions are as important as what choice is made in most decisions.

Couple Discussion Questions: What are the most common obstacles or temptations you face in following through on decisions or agreements? What is an example of when you mislabeled a good decision as ineffective because of poor execution? Do both of you realize that failure to follow through on a mutually agreed upon decision is a character issue and a form of dishonesty?

18. **The spouse with the more dominant personality seems to make all the decisions.** Unless we’re careful the leader in a relationship is merely the person who is more passionate about his/her opinions. If you’re the spouse who naturally responds to “Where do you want to eat?” with “I don’t care,” then (male or female), with time, it is likely you’ll begin to feel like you have no voice.

This may have nothing to do with your spouse being controlling. However, unless a couple is intentional about how to interrupt this common dynamic then the level of assertiveness in each of your personalities will determine how you make marital decisions.

Couple Discussion Questions: Which of you has the more assertive personality and how has that affected your decision making? What couples do you know who manage their differences in assertiveness well? What is the difference between “balancing each other out” and “learning to honor each other in our differences”?

19. **We want no risk.** – Many of us (although we don’t say it this way) become paralyzed in decision making because we want godly decision making to produce a risk-free life. We think that making decisions within God’s will should always be safe. We see a moment to follow God, know it is biblical, feel compelled to do so but shrink back because of risk (i.e., social rejection, financial uncertainty, not knowing “what will happen next,” etc...).

“God’s plan can include risk (p. 38).” Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

“In my counseling practice I find that almost all anxiety-related problems are caused by a supposed need to know the future in some form (p. 73).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

While the adage “There is no safer place to be than in the center of God’s will” is true some ways, at times, it is completely false. Read through the Bible (almost any book from Genesis to Revelation) and see if God’s people were always safe. We read their stories in retrospect and see what God did. Yet they lived as we did; making decisions in real moments not knowing what God would do.

Couple Discussion Questions: Are you prone to think that if you “get God’s will right” that you should experience peace in every decision you make? How do each of you approach risk in the decision making process differently? How well do the two of you walk together (supporting and challenging each other) in the tension of faith and fear?

20. **I don’t care. I’m tired. I want a break. I don’t want to think about it.** Apathy and fatigue are two of the biggest obstacles to decision making. It takes energy to care, think, and communicate. Usually with mindless decisions and the busy-ness of life we pack our days/weeks so full that we don’t feel like we have time to be intentional in our decision making.

Once apathy towards decision making sets in it usually takes a crisis before we snap out of our stupor. Then we have a crisis to manage. We are intentional in the crisis, but fail to address the lifestyle choices that led to the fatigue and apathy. The result is that we reinforce the notion that being intentional "won't do any good" and continue to live as if life has to be exhausting and out-of-control.

Couple Discussion Questions: When is each of you most prone to live as if intentionality wouldn't do any good? Has crisis management become a way of life in your marriage? How effectively do each of you respond when the other is overwhelmed and feeling complacent?

Conclusion

If you feel slightly overwhelmed by the number of challenges you face in decision making, be encouraged. That means this material is designed to speak to the challenges you and your spouse / fiancé are facing.

As you go through this material, realize you will learn it in the same way you'll implement it – imperfectly, a piece at a time, as you grow wiser in the process, and learning to trust God more with your successes and failures.

That should be one of the biggest "points of relief" in this material – God's goal for your decision making is the refinement of your character to become more like Christ. God is patient as He makes us wise. God is willing to work in and through even our failures when we trust Him with them.

You and your spouse have the opportunity to model that same character of God towards one another. The goal of this seminar is not merely to teach you the steps of various styles of decision making, but "how" to make decisions in marriage (i.e., living out the gospel towards one another in the process of decision making).

What you should learn in this material is that the process of decision making is where you learn to trust God and build unity with one another. Without that kind of gospel-centered process, then even the best outcomes tend to become relationally dry or create performance pressure.

Gospel-centered decision making in marriage does not excuse bad decisions. If they're sinful, repentance is necessary. If they're foolish, learning is always advised. But it does offer freedom from the kind of challenges discussed in this chapter; a freedom that allows two people to grow closer to God and each other through their mistake (not just in spite of them).

Hopefully, the honest reflections you've had throughout this chapter will allow you to both (a) assimilate this material more effectively and (b) allow you feel more fully known and fully loved by God and your spouse as you learn.

Chapter 2

Thinking about God's Will What Do We Mean and What Are We Looking For?

Plumb Lines: These are the "sticky" statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Heaven is where God's sovereign will, moral will, and individual will are finally in harmony again.
- Finding God's will is not pressure-based, target practice at a tiny center point in a Bull's Eye.
- God is not a passive-aggressive deity punishing you for things He didn't say but you were "supposed to know."
- God gives His most personal guidance through His personal design of you.

Memorize: Ecclesiastes 12:12-13 (ESV), "My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- "Beware" – God warns us to be cautious in how we approach decision making; it touches every area of our life.
- "Weariness" – God recognizes our tendency to exhaust ourselves by trying to make things too complicated.
- "End of the matter" – The author of Ecclesiastes had tried every approach to pleasure and fulfillment he could find.
- "Fear God and keep his commandments" – These are the two guard rails the Bible gives for decision making.
- "Whole duty of man" – If we ask God, "What's going to be on the final exam?" this verse reveals God's answer.

Teaching Notes

"The will of God' is one of the most confusing phrases in the Christian vocabulary. Sometimes we speak of all things happening according to God's will. Other times we talk about being obedient and doing the will of God. And still other times we talk about finding the will of God. The confusion is due to our using the phrase 'the will of God' in a least three different ways, typified in the previous three sentences (p. 18)." Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

"In the progress of His revelation, God moved from a highly structured system of regulations governing a wide range of specific behaviors to a system where behavior is to be determined by principles and governed by personal relationship (p. 86)... If the believer is free to choose, he is also required to choose (p. 181)." Garry Friesen in *Decision Making and the Will of God*

"What is God's will for my life?' is not the best question to ask. I think the right question is simply 'What is God's will?' Once I know God's will, then I can adjust my life to Him and His purposes.... The focus needs to be on God and His purposes, not my life! (p. 18)" Henry Blackaby in *Experiencing God*

"God's positive commandments are open-ended... For this reason there will never be any system for discerning the will of God that reduces obedience to a set of behaviors and procedures for every situation (p. 137)... We sinners do not like open-ended commands. We can't be in control with them, especially when the commands are hard to fulfill because of our sin (p. 138)." James Petty in *Step by Step*

"God does have a specific plan for our lives, but it is not one that He expects us to figure out before we make a decision (p. 24)... What I am saying is that we should stop thinking of God's will like a corn maze, or a tight-rope, or a bull's eye, or a choose-your-own-adventure novel... Many of us fear we'll take the wrong job, or buy the wrong house, or declare the wrong major, or marry the wrong person, and suddenly our lives will blow up. We'll be out of God's will, doomed to spiritual, relational, and physical failure (p. 25)." Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

"When we need guidance; it usually involves a situation in which the basic alternatives are all legitimate – legally and biblically (p. 90)... In other words, in this area [Christian liberty] God has revealed no preference about our choices between this and that, but he is not indifferent to our motives about which one we choose... Our motives for everything we do are always deeply and spiritually relevant to our relationship to God (p. 129)." James Petty in *Step by Step*

Embedded Study

Often when someone is going through a hard time they will talk about “working on” or “processing” their pain. Those sound like concrete phrases. If someone is “working on” a fence, we can safely assume hammer, nails, or paint is involved. If a store is “processing” a purchase, we can assume they are shipping the product and passing the finances through their accounting department. But in the relational or emotional realm phrases like “working on” and “processing” become highly ambiguous.

Similarly, in the church, we talk about “God’s will” as if it were a clear concept, but often we feel as confused as someone who lost a loved one and is trying to “do grief.” We think God’s will is something we should naturally know how to pursue. The fact that we use the phrase “God’s will” frequently only makes this misconception and the accompanying insecurity worse.

In this chapter we want to answer two questions that will help us know what we’re talking about when we talk about “trying to find God’s will” for a decision: (1) How many ways does the Bible define “God’s will”? and (2) How should we think about finding God’s will?

Answering these questions will set the stage for chapter three, where we will provide principles for personal decision making that are essential for the health of a marriage between two perpetual decision makers (i.e., people).

How Many Ways Does the Bible Define “God’s Will?”

The Bible talks about “God’s will” in at least three very distinct ways. This accounts for many of the arguments Christians have about God’s will. Often committed Christian couples will argue because they emphasize one of these definitions of “God’s will” over the other two. Both are left feeling the other is less-spiritual or hyper-spiritual when, in fact, they have not been talking about the same thing.

1. **God’s Sovereign Will:** This is what we refer to when we say that “God is the author of history” or “Nothing happens without God’s permission.” God’s sovereign will is what allowed God to inspire prophets to foretell details about the birth of Christ and write about the end times. There is nothing in our decisions that can interrupt God’s sovereign will. We are never out of God’s sovereign will. God does not make a “Plan B” for anyone’s life.

Passages: Here are several passages that refer to God’s sovereign will – Proverbs 21:1; Acts 2:23, 4:27-28; Romans 9:19, 11:33-36; Ephesians 1:11; and Revelation 4:11. What do you learn about God’s will from these passages?

Applied Rightly: God’s sovereign will gives us confidence that we can pray boldly against injustice knowing God is capable of affecting change. God’s sovereign will gives us peace knowing there is order behind the seeming chaos of our broken world. God’s sovereign will gives us assurance there is meaning and significance to our choices.

When have you experienced the benefits of thinking about God’s sovereign will rightly?

Applied Wrongly: God’s sovereign will does not mean we are robots living out a program about which we’re unaware. God’s sovereign will does not give us permission to be flippant about important choices or risky actions. God’s sovereign will does not allow us to justify sin with “God knew I was going to do it.”

When have you experienced the consequences of thinking about God’s sovereign will wrongly?

2. **God’s Moral Will:** This refers to God’s commandments and God’s character. God’s moral will is the ideal that defines how things should be on earth and how they will be in heaven. God’s moral will is where the words “good” and “bad” get their meaning. God’s moral will is why we experience guilt and place high value on things that are pure.

Passages: Here are several passages that refer to God’s moral will – Romans 2:18; II Corinthians 6:14; I Thessalonians 4:3-4, 5:18; and biblical commands. What do you learn about God’s will from these passages?

Applied Rightly: God's moral will is the clearest and most accessible part of God's will. God's moral will is the expression of God's character through behavioral expectations. God's moral will is meant to regulate many of our emotional experiences (i.e., guilt, awe, longing) as we treasure God's character more than the things that upset, motivate, or please us.

"The moral will of God is the expression, in behavioral terms, of the character of God (p. 153)." Garry Friesen in *Decision Making and the Will of God*

When have you experienced the benefits of thinking about God's moral will rightly?

Applied Wrongly: God's moral will is not an insecure deity arbitrarily enforcing His preference on His creation. God's moral will does not belong to (i.e., is not defined by) any time period, generation, or culture. God's moral will is not meant to be used as a leveraging point to allow some people to feel superior to others.

When have you experienced the consequences of thinking about God's moral will wrongly?

- 3. **God's Individual Will:** This is what most people want to know when they ask questions about "God's will." This arena of God's will seeks to answer the questions: What does God want to do through the passions, experiences, and talents He's given me? Who does God want me to partner with through life (i.e., marriage, church, friends, job) to accomplish these purposes? How should I utilize the resources God has given me (i.e., money, time, talent)?

Passages: Here are several passages that refer to God's individual will –Psalm 32:8; Proverbs 3:5-6, 16:9; Romans 12:2; Ephesians 2:8, 5:15-17, 6:6; and Colossians 1:9-10. What do you learn about God's will from these passages?

Applied Rightly: God's individual will should cause us to reflect on how God made us and how we can best serve Him with those gifts. God's individual will should cause us to ask, "How would God reveal His character in this circumstance?" God's individual will should usually be in keeping with the interests and passions God gave you.

When have you experienced the benefits of thinking about God's individual will rightly?

Applied Wrongly: God's individual will should not be a point of insecurity or pride as we compare life circumstances with other people. God's individual will should not be a fearful attempt to find the perfect option in every situation as if God were playing "hard to get." God's individual will should not be assumed to be fearful or dreaded in order to be appropriately "spiritual" or marked by faith.

When have you experienced the consequences of thinking about God's individual will wrongly?

At this point you should be able to identify what you, your spouse, a friend, or a Bible passage is referencing in a particular usage of the phrase "God's will." The more decisions two Christians make together, the more they need to agree upon how to think about God's will. Otherwise, the Bible, subjective feelings of being "lead" to do something, and emotions of guilt or insecurity will begin to divide the marriage.

How Should We Think About Finding God's Will?

Just because we know what something is doesn't mean we know how to pursue it. How many youth want to be a great athlete or musician, but aren't sure how to pursue their interest (not just work ethic, but fundamentals)? How many adults want to be effective parents but aren't sure where to start?

The same can be said for God’s will. We want to be “in” it, but aren’t sure what that looks like. In the remainder of this chapter we will clear up one of the larger conceptual challenges about God’s will that plagues many believers with fear or results in them being cynical that they’ll “ever get it right.” In the next chapter we’ll lay out a process of thinking through wise personal decision making – the foundation of healthy marital decision making.

The misconception has to do with how we understand the relationship between three things:

1. **God’s Negative Commands:** These are the “thou shall not’s” of Scripture. This material does not question whether we should obey God; that is the assumed delight of a gospel-centered marriage. The question is not whether other priorities “trump” a biblical prohibition; that would imply God was short-sighted. The question is whether God’s negative commands are better viewed as (a) the fence around our decision making options or (b) the solid core from which our decision making begins.
2. **God’s Positive Commands:** These are the “thou shall’s” of Scripture. By necessity these are less clear than negative commands. The implications of “do not steal” (negative command) are clear. But it is less clear how, when, with what, and with whom God would have us “be generous” (positive command). As time and space bound creatures who require rest, we cannot obey all the commands of Scripture at every moment. How we think about God’s positive commands determines whether our temptations center on exhaustion or excuses.
3. **Our Choices of Preference:** There are many decisions to which the Bible does not intend to speak. God did not intend to be “The Grand Regulator.” God made us with passions, talents, interests, curiosities, and preferences. The question we need to wrestle with here is, “How much freedom and what type of freedom do we have with our preferences?” Understanding the role of preferences in individual decision making will be important, because much of marital decision making involves appreciating, deferring to, and melding with your spouse’s preferences.

The order in which these three things should be considered during decision making is clear: (1) God’s negative commands – is there anything wrong in what I’m considering; (2) God’s positive commands – what would God’s agenda be in this situation; and (3) choices of preference – how did God design me to express His agenda in this situation?

The difficulty comes not with the order, but how we conceptualize these three pieces fitting together. We’ll look at two diagrams to see how one way of relating these three things results in fear and the other results in freedom.

Three Circles as Bull’s Eye

The most common way to think about the order of these three things, even for those who have not given much thought to them, is the “Bull’s Eye” concept. In this conception, God’s negative commands are the outer ring of the Bull’s Eye. Once we eliminate all the things you’re not supposed to do in a situation, you are closer to God’s perfect will for that circumstance.

Next in this view, you should think through all the relevant positive commands related to this decision. After having done that you have “quarantined” all the legitimate options within God’s will. But because you are trying to hit the center of the Bull’s Eye pressure still remains. Now the hard work of discernment begins. You have to eliminate all the “good” options from the “best” option in order to be “in the center of God’s will.”

When organized in this way, God’s will begins to feel like the proverbial “needle in the haystack.” In every circumstance, at least by whatever measure we consider a decision “significant,” there is believed to be only one “right” decision in a myriad of otherwise acceptable decisions. Notice there is only one arrow going to a single “x” in this diagram.

God can easily be viewed as passive-aggressively unfair because He is displeased with choices that He never said would upset Him. We were “just supposed to know” and when we didn’t we have to live knowing He’s not happy and our relationship is not what it would have been.

If we don’t fall into this trap of fear, wanting the exact center, then we tend to get consumed with defining the edge. How close can we get to God’s negative commands (where we think the fun is, because we’re exhausted by searching for the center) without being punished? God becomes someone we have to please for eternal happiness (heaven) but someone we have to avoid for temporal happiness. That is the essence of being double-minded (James 1:6-8).

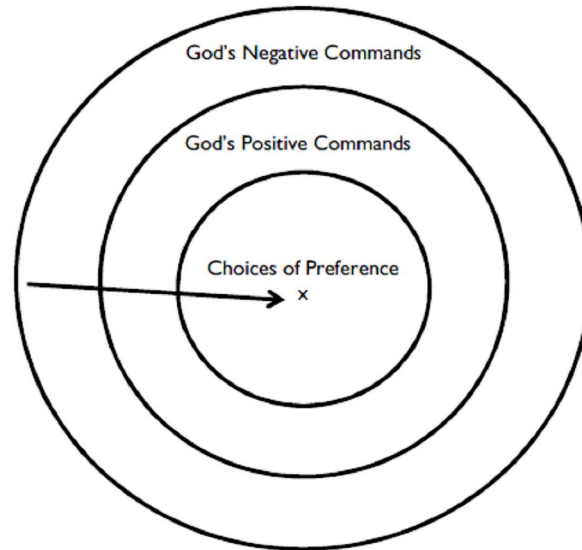


Figure 2.1
Bull's Eye Conception
of the Will of God

Three Circles Inside Out

So let's ask the questions, "What happens when we keep the order of movement (negative, positive, preference) but reverse the arrangement of the circles?" God's negative commands become the part of God's will that are most solid (i.e., like the hard core of a baseball). What God expects is very clear; little to no discernment is needed. This is the foundation from which we build.

Next we pass through God's positive commands. Again, we are looking for God's agenda for this circumstance. At this point, very little has changed between Figure 2.1 and 2.2. The same non-options are still non-options and the same character of God is setting the agenda.

But as we enter the third circle a great deal has changed. We have traded the fear of "getting it right" for an almost overwhelming number of options. We begin to realize that God is not merely a monarch who enforces His will by moral legislation (although He is King and does give laws). God is also a Creator who enacts His will through the design (i.e., personality, passions, talents, etc...) He placed in us at conception (Psalm 139:13-14).

"While God's sovereign plan covers every detail of our lives, by contrast, his will and preferences for our lives leave large areas where personal preference and decision rule (p. 123-124)." James Petty in *Step by Step*

"Effective law making requires the assumption of freedom of choice and activity within the designated limitations (p. 168)... In fact, as revelation has become more complete, the areas of freedom and responsibility have grown (p. 169)." Garry Friesen in *Decision Making and the Will of God*

Because God enacts His will by design (Creator) as much as He does decree (King), there are many arrows in Figure 2.2. That is not meant to imply there are many versions of right and wrong, but that the context of our lives (i.e., physical location, relationships, occupation, etc...) and our design will (i.e., personality, passions, talents, etc...) will impact how and where we manifest the character of God.

More than merely recognizing a reality, Figure 2.2 would assert that a big part of how God's reveals His will for specific individuals is through His design. God doesn't write individual scripts by giving clues or promptings as much as he gives general instruction to people He created with great individuality.

"In those areas where the Bible gives no command or principle (nonmoral decisions), the believer is free and responsible to choose his own course of action (p. 151)." Garry Friesen in *Decision Making and the Will of God*

That doesn't mean God doesn't give personal promptings, but that this is not the primary way He directs people towards His will for their life. The more we expect moment-by-moment promptings, the more we are thinking of the Bull's Eye conception of God's Will.

Think of it this way: God says, "I've told you what things are destructive and off limits. I've given you a mission statement in the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40) and Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). I've shown you my character

throughout the Bible. I've blessed you with certain talents, passions, and interests. Within that you're free to enjoy life as you make as big of an impact for my kingdom as you can. Go! Change the world! Have fun doing it!”

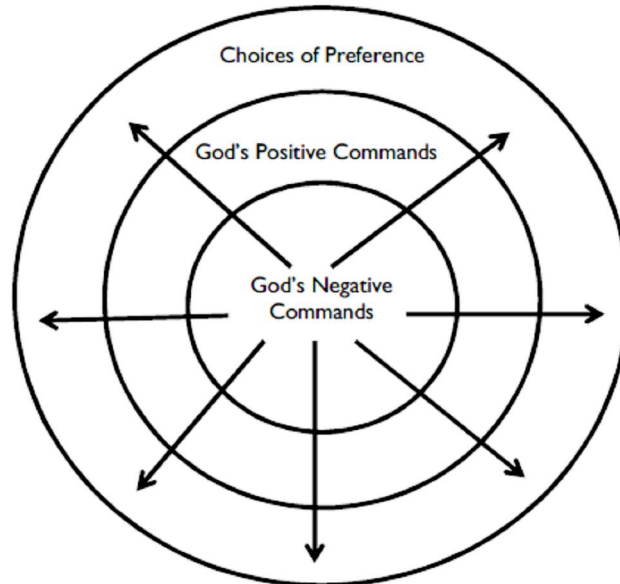


Figure 2.2
Wisdom Conception
of the Will of God

Several Biblical Case Studies: Is this really how God leads His people? Does God really give us that much freedom to choose without living in fear of missing His perfect will? Let's look at several examples in Scripture.

- Acts 15:28-29 – Notice how the early church handled non-moral points of social conflict – “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” They were trying to make a decision on matters not directly covered by God's negative commands (eating food sacrificed to idols), so they prayed about it (seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit), chose to remind each other of the command their culture was most lax in following (sexual immorality), and then made the decision that seemed most wise in their context.
- Acts 20:16 – Paul decided to focus his efforts on one ministry area (Jerusalem) more than another (Ephesus) during this season of his life. Paul loved the Ephesians. When he met with their leaders it was a tearfully affectionate time (20:36-38). But the passage gives no indication that Paul received any prompting for this decision beyond his personal burden to be in Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost.
- I Corinthians 6:39 – Here Paul is giving marriage advice to widows. Notice he says she can marry “whom she wishes” (expectation that her personal preferences play a very large role) as long as her prospective husband is “in the Lord” (a positive command that God gives as a screening criteria).
- I Corinthians 16:5-9 – Paul again lays out his travel plans on the basis of a practical assessment of how to best accomplish the general mission God had given him. Factors like weather, financial support, and current effectiveness of ministry were what he used to make his plans. No doubt Paul prayed and sought God, but he does not seem compelled to substantiate his decisions with any situation-specific promptings or signs.

Conclusion

What should you have gotten from this chapter? First, you should have learned the different ways that the Bible speaks of God's will and begin to see how confusion on this leads to confusion for many individuals and conflict in many marriages. Second, you should have learned the relevance of how we conceptualize God's negative commands and positive commands for a healthy experience of Christian liberty that allows us to live in freedom instead of fear.

"Trusting in God's will of decree is good. Following His will of desire is obedient. Waiting for God's will of direction is a mess. It is bad for your life, harmful to your sanctification, and allows too many Christians to be passive tinkerers who strangely feel more spiritual the less they actually do (p. 26)." Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

What didn't you learn in this chapter? You didn't learn how to make hard decisions where you feel conflicted over multiple good options. You learned you're free to choose, but not how to choose. That is the subject of chapter three. But as you go into chapter three do not forget what you learned in chapter two; otherwise you will take principles of wisdom and try to turn them into a recipe for certainty. While that may seem good, it is just a new way into the old Figure 2.1 trap.

In this chapter we learned we are free. In the next chapter we will learn how to steward our freedom. Learning to steward our freedom well is a key to marital unity and satisfaction. If we steward our decision making freedom like the stereotypical college freshman stewards his/her new found freedom from parents, we will damage our marriage. The pain created will limit our legitimate freedom as we repair trust.

But if we learn to manage this decision making freedom well it will be a huge part of cultivating a life-long, mutually-satisfying marriage. As we will see, responsible, God-honoring personal decision making is the foundation for both forms of joint decision making in marriage (consensus and headship-submission).

Chapter 3

Personal Decision Making Process Living Wisely in the Freedom God Gives

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Our decision making process cannot be more linear than life allows.
- God’s will fits within God’s provision.
- Wisdom won’t reduce to pragmatics. Holiness won’t reduce to character. Wisdom and holiness are interdependent.
- Our confidence is in God’s faithfulness and ability to redeem more than our ability to master a process.

Memorize: Proverbs 3:5-10 (ESV), “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will be bursting with wine.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “All your heart” – God’s personal guidance begins with a personal relationship that is our first priority.
- “He will make straight” – Simple obedience and living on mission makes most decisions either clear or secondary.
- “Turn from evil” – Sin complicates life. If a hard decision does not involve sin, then you’re in a safe, good place.
- “With your wealth” – Personal decision making requires wise management of resources like time and money.
- “Plenty” – With contentment there is “plenty” whereas a life seeking abundance will always feel like “not enough.”

Teaching Notes

“The focus of the Bible is God. The essence of sin is a shift from God-centered to a self-centered life. The essence of salvation is a denial of self... When this happens, God can accomplish through us the purposes He had before He created the world (p. 63).” Henry Blackaby in *Experiencing God*

“Both wisdom and foolishness are self-replicating and self-reinforcing (p. 177)... We need advice if we are confident of a decision because most foolish decisions are ‘clear’ to the fool (p. 223).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

“The path of wisdom is a lifestyle of repentance from serving functional gods like security, safety, control of situations, pleasure, power, ease, avoidance of pain, and approval. God will systematically expose any such rivals in our hearts that divert us from loving and worshipping him (p. 179).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

“If God opens the door for you to do something you know is good or necessary, be thankful for the opportunity. But other than that, don’t assume that the relative ease or difficulty of a new situation is God’s way of telling you to do one thing or the other (p. 78)... We cannot infallibly judge the rightness or wrongness of our plans based on the feelings we have about them after prayer (p. 85).” Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

“Most of us (particularly men) do not put ourselves in a position to receive that kind of feedback. Yet the ‘one-anothering’ ministry of the New Testament and Proverbs is basic to the ability to reflect God in our lives (p. 183).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

“The way you pray for guidance forces you to decide if God is just a vending machine to give you what you want within your time frame, or whether you are God’s servant, seeking to do his will within his time frame (p. 216).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

“Sometimes God grants us abundant time to decide, sometimes only a split second. But the season of decision making is under God’s control, and so when it comes, it comes by his plan (p. 239).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

Embedded Study

It is one thing to “see” a fashion faux pas or the spin on a curve ball. It is another thing to be able to know what to “do” in response to either; what fashion correction to make or how to adjust your swing. In the last chapter, we gained eyes to see several of the most common misconceptions or points of confusion about decision making and God’s will. In this chapter, we will strive to learn what to do with that information.

As we walk into this conversation, there is a dilemma we must address. Most discussions of decision making, secular or Christian, tend to be highly linear (step to step); but most moments of decision making do not lend themselves to a thorough process. This accounts for why we sometimes think that God’s will is only relevant for the “big decisions” of life – those both warranting and allowing the time for prayer, research, and deliberation.

This dilemma is only exacerbated by marriage. We want to be “on the same page” with our spouse in our decision making, even our personal decisions. However, this would require an additional step of consultation that is either cumbersome or not feasible to many decisions.

In this material, we will use “steps” (but in a loose sense of that word). However, as we discuss each “step” strong consideration will be given to how each “step” can be incorporated into a lifestyle. Guidance will also be given to how to develop “standard healthy practices” in marriage to allow for greater unity in personal decision making.

Here are the steps for personal decision making we’ll use as the major divisions in this chapter.

1. Live with Your “Yes” on the Table for God
2. Identify What You’re Stewarding for God
3. Manage the Basics with Excellence
4. Watch for Challenges and Opportunities
5. Pursue the Necessary Information and Counsel
6. Seek God’s Guidance through Study and Prayer
7. Decide with Confidence and Freedom

Step One:

Live with Your “Yes” on the Table for God

Ask yourself, “When I find God’s will, do I still want the freedom to walk away or will my mind be made up?” This question is essential to gospel-centered decision making. This is the essence of what it means to call Jesus “Lord,” which is the necessary implication of accepting the gospel.

“To be guided by God into his will, we must lay our entire lives, our future, our bodily health, our personal happiness, our money, our relationships, and our goals all on the altar, and dedicate them to his purposes... The unconsecrated person seeks to use God’s guidance to achieve his own goals. God is his servant, there to build his kingdom. That, of course, is the norm in pagan religious guidance (p. 194).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

From chapter two you should realize that God does not micro-manage our lives. Rather, as the author of our lives, He does a large portion of His guidance through the personality, skills, and passions He placed in us. However, because of the brokenness of sin and folly, God’s absolute Lordship is a necessary foundation for decision making. We cannot simply “follow our heart” for at least two reasons:

1. Sin: The presence of bad desires. Our hearts cannot be trusted (Jer. 17:9-10). We all have stories where sincerity and passion blew up in our face. The reality of sin means that God’s moral guidance is an essential guardrail for the unique passions and interests we each have.
2. Folly: Too many or exaggerated good desires. We can derail our lives without sinning. Following God is not just about saying “no” to sin, but also saying “no” to many good things that would distract from the most important things in life.

“Wisdom, in Proverbs, is always moral. The fool, the opposite of the wise person, is not a moron or an oaf. The fool is the person who does not live life God’s way (p. 89).” Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

Assessment: These questions help you assess how well you are implementing this step of personal decision making.

- Do you believe your sin and folly require both the gospel and God’s continual guidance for a satisfying life?
- Do you believe that honoring God in your decision making is the only way to lasting joy?
- Do you believe that God is good and, therefore, can be trusted to guide your life?

Lifestyle: These actions steps are ways you can implement this step of personal decision making as a lifestyle. Having a lifestyle conducive to godly decision making is essential for (a) decisions that are incompatible with a formal process of decision making and (b) protecting the unity of your marriage in your personal decisions.

- Have a regular time of Bible study so that you are daily exposed to God’s will through God’s Word.
- Be in a small group where you are transparent about your struggles so that your areas of most frequent apathy or neglect do not become points of drifting from God’s will.
- Take the Sabbath rest God gives to His people so that God’s call to follow does not begin to seem oppressive.

Step Two: Identify What You’re Stewarding for God

The majority of God’s will should be self-evident when you answer the question, “What are the priority relationships and responsibilities in my life?” Add to that question, “What are my talents and areas of passion?” and you will have the raw materials for determining the vast majority of God’s will.

Discernment can be difficult when one or more of these areas (relationships, responsibilities, talents, or passions) are in transition. Those kinds of decisions should be engaged with a slower and more deliberate decision making process. However, most of your day-to-day decisions will be made by honoring God’s design and placement in these areas.

“There are actually profound spiritual battles involved in serving according to one’s design rather than for money, family approval, status, power, or recognition (p. 160).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

“Unfortunately, we’ve turned the idea of calling or vocation on its head. The Reformers emphasized calling in order to break down the sacred-secular divide. They said, if you are working for the glory of God, you are doing the Lord’s work, no matter whether you’re a priest or a monk or a banker. But we’ve taken this notion of calling and turned it upside down, so instead of finding purpose in every kind of work, we are madly looking for the one job that will fulfill our purpose in life (p. 103).” Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

Assessment: These questions help you assess how well you are implementing this step of personal decision making.

- Make a prioritized list of your (a) relationships, (b) responsibilities, (c) talents, and (d) passions.
- How does your list compare and compliment the lists your spouse / fiancé made?
- What areas on your list are in transition or when do you anticipate the next transition in each area?

Lifestyle: These actions steps are ways you can implement this step of personal decision making as a lifestyle. Having a lifestyle conducive to godly decision making is essential for (a) decisions that are incompatible with a formal process of decision making and (b) protecting the unity of your marriage in your personal decisions.

- Filter the things you say “yes” to through the prioritized list you made.
- Spend as much time day dreaming about your spouse’s list as you do your own.
- Pray through the lists you made regularly; asking God when and how He wants to use you in these areas.

Step Three: Manage the Basics with Excellence

God’s will fits within God’s provision. This principle cuts two ways. First, it tells us that God does not ask us to do things that require more than He provides. If you do not have the money to send your kids to private school, then that is not God’s will. Second, it tells us that a large part of living in God’s will is managing our time and money well so that we are free to accomplish with them the purposes for which God gave them to us.

If you take God’s Word seriously, then you will quickly realize this principle does not make living in God’s will “easy.” There are more good things we are commanded to do than we have time or money to accomplish them. This is why we must “prioritize absolutes,” emphasizing certain aspects of what God commands us to do over other during particular seasons of life.

This is not a contradiction or cop-out, but a call to live in community. We do not “get out” of any command, but often we fulfill a command by how we participate and invest in our church. Being actively involved in a biblically balanced church is essential to living in God’s will.

“This requires setting priorities among absolutes. Let me explain. God commands us to evangelize, do missions, remember the poor, exhort and encourage one another, worship publicly and privately, visit the prisoners, show hospitality, love our spouses, bring up our children, and work at our vocation with all our heart. The question... is not *whether* we do them, but *when*, and *in what order* (p. 92).” James Petty in *Step by Step*

Time and money are highly interrelated. If you do not manage your money well, then you will forfeit time as you work to pay for things that were unwise purchases. If you do not manage your time well, then it will likely contribute to you spending your money in unwise ways. Regardless of the chicken-or-egg origin of the dilemma, folly with money or time will severely interfere with your ability to pursue God’s will for your life.

Assessment: These questions help you assess how well you are implementing this step of personal decision making.

- Do you have a family budget that each of you understand, honor, and consider as you make decisions?
- Do you have common expectations for your time that protects your family and guides your decision making?
- Do you anticipate future decisions and transitions in light of these two basic life resources?

Lifestyle: These actions steps are ways you can implement this step of personal decision making as a lifestyle. Having a lifestyle conducive to godly decision making is essential for (a) decisions that are incompatible with a formal process of decision making and (b) protecting the unity of your marriage in your personal decisions.

- Mutually commit to live within your means; both with regards to money and time.
- Create a financial budget that allows you to track family’s monthly finances and mid-to-long-term goals. If you need assistance creating this visit www.bradhambrick.com/GCMfinances for the “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Finances” seminar.
- Create a time budget that allows you to think through how to best steward the 168 hour week God entrusts to you. If you need assistance creating this, Appendix B “Creating a Time Budget” provides a tool.

Step Four: Watch for Challenges and Opportunities

Once you have a God-honoring “normal” for your weekly schedule and monthly expenses, your focus can shift to seeking God’s will in the unique opportunities and challenges that life presents. The majority of your decisions will naturally be made as you and your spouse prayerfully considered how to honor God through the stewardship of your time and money. This frees your mind to seek Him in your non-normal decisions.

We will divide these non-normal decisions into four categories.

1. **Daily Opportunities:** In step three we talked about “prioritizing absolutes.” This is where that gets lived out. We should live with an awareness of God’s commands and perpetually praying, “When? Where? Who? How? God give me eyes to see which positive commands you will give me the opportunity to fulfill today.”
2. **Daily Temptations:** We know that sin is both always outside God’s will and crouching at our door. Nothing gets our life out of balance like sin. When we sin we give the time and energy God purposed for our joy to desires that will only ask for more and more of our time and energy. The result of sin is that living in God’s will begins to seem increasingly complicated and unrealistic.
3. **Transitional Opportunities:** Decisions such as where to go to school, what to study, who to marry, which job to take, whether to move, what home to buy, how many children to have, how to educate your children, what to do with an “empty nest,” and what ongoing ministries to be involved in fit in this category.

These are the kind of decisions that change the "normal" you established in step three. These are decisions with which you need to be most deliberate in your decision making process. However, if you are faithful to have realistic expectations of each other, your money, and your time, it should make these decisions increasingly clear.

4. **Transitional Challenges:** Each transition will bring not only opportunities but new challenges and temptations. New parents face sleep deprivation and an array of new reasons to cooperate with each other. A job change with better pay presents significant lifestyle choices. Moving results in an overhaul of relationships and routines.

Know that Satan will use these more "opportune times" (Luke 4:13) where we are ignorant of what to expect to disrupt our lives. These are time when it is extra important for couples to communicate well (quality and quantity) with each other and to seek the counsel of trusted Christian friends who have faced similar transitions.

Assessment: These questions help you assess how well you are implementing this step of personal decision making.

- Do you have "normal" that mentally frees you to look for daily opportunities to obey God's positive commands?
- What daily temptations most commonly make following God's will seem complicated or unrealistic?
- What are the next anticipated transitions for your family? What opportunities and challenges will they bring?

Lifestyle: These actions steps are ways you can implement this step of personal decision making as a lifestyle. Having a lifestyle conducive to godly decision making is essential for (a) decisions that are incompatible with a formal process of decision making and (b) protecting the unity of your marriage in your personal decisions.

- Keep a running list of the positive commands you find in your daily study of Scripture. Use this as a "scavenger hunt" list and pray for opportunities to do the things God calls every Christian to do during the regular rhythm of your life.
- Be transparent with your spouse and small group about the daily temptations that you face. Nothing fuels the fire of temptation like privacy and nothing squelches the fire of temptation like honesty. Transparency about temptation is the most overlooked "method" for discovering God will.
- Each year around your anniversary have an intentional conversation about, "What transitions can we realistically expect in the next year?" Use this as a time to begin (not finish) conversations about the opportunities and challenges those transitions will bring.

Step Five: Pursue the Necessary Information and Counsel

If you are following the recommendations given, then the vast majority of decisions will either (a) not require this research because they're covered in the information you naturally track in your "healthy normal" or (b) have the opportunity to be discussed as a part of your regular life-in-community through small group.

"Our information gathering requires us to see with our own eyes the situation in which we must trust God and make decisions (p. 201)." James Petty in *Step by Step*

However, the transitional decisions and more difficult daily decisions from step four will benefit from additional research and advisement. As you do additional research it is advised that you talk to four types of people. The same person may fit more than one category. But in a major decision it is advisable to hear from all four vantage points.

- I. **Those Who Know You:** The process of gospel-centered decision making begins before you start making a decision. If your gospel-community is going to be of real benefit to you in a decision, then they have to know the real you and you have to know them before the process begins.

You need to talk to someone who knows how you would typically spin a decision in your favor or to your detriment; someone who knows your most common fears and temptations; someone who knows your family commitments and personal limitations; and someone who has a good sense of what "fits" you. If you don't know who that person is, then start making yourself known ASAP!

Information Question: In light of how you know me, what questions am I failing to ask or giving too much or too little weight?

2. **Those Who Know Your Situation:** Somebody has faced what you’re facing (1 Cor. 10:13). Chances are there are people with ample experience or expertise in this type of decision. Find them. Ask them for their assessment of what you know (to this point in the process) and their evaluation of how you’re approaching the decision.

Most decisions (not just decision makers) have common pitfalls or blind spots. Find out what these are. One of the defining marks of humility is the willingness to be a perpetual learner. Wisdom is often knowing who to ask and being willing to ask more than knowing the answer.

Information Question: What aspects of this decision am I not considering and how do you hear that influencing the way I’m leaning in this decision?

3. **Those Whose Character You Trust:** Wisdom cannot be reduced to pragmatics. Ethics and logistics will not separate like oil and water; light and dark. The goals and priorities we carry into a decision magnify certain aspects and blind us to others. Often information gathering can focus our attention on logistics and cause character concerns to fade. We want to talk to someone who will balance that common pitfall.

When facing a big decision it is wise to talk with someone whose character you admire – someone who loves their spouse and children well, has integrity in their work place, and can navigate stress or conflict with civility. You want to hear how someone who manages their soul well thinks about the decision you’re facing.

Information Question: What stands out to you as the key opportunities and challenges I will face in this decision with regards to my character in each of the available options?

4. **Those Whose Wisdom You Trust:** Holiness cannot be reduced to character. A fully devoted person who is naïve or ill-informed on major decisions will put him/herself in a position where it is increasingly difficult to maintain one’s character. For example, a sincere but unrealistic use of time will result in failing to keep one’s word.

When facing a big decision it is wise to talk with someone who manages their life in a way you admire – someone who does not over commit, manages their finances well, and can filter through complex situations well. Even a non-Christian who has the common-grace ability to think administratively can be used by God to provide useful guidance.

Information Question: What stands out to you as the key points of functionality or potential dysfunction in each of the available options in this decision?

Read Proverbs 11:14 and 18:1, 13. It was not good when Adam was alone (Gen. 2:18). By himself Adam was unable to express the full character of God; having been made in God’s image to reflect His glory, this was incomplete – less than good. God created community, beginning with Eve and their children, so that the human race could reflect God’s character more fully. These verses in Proverbs reveal the folly and destruction when we revert to isolation in our decision making.

“We spend all this time asking God, ‘What’s Your will?’ when He’s probably thinking, ‘Make a friend, would you? Go talk to someone. There’s a reason I’ve redeemed a lot of you – because you do fewer dumb things when you talk to each other. Get some advice. You might just hear My voice (p. 95-96).” Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

Assessment: These questions help you assess how well you are implementing this step of personal decision making.

- Who knows you and your life well enough to speak into a significant decision?
- Do you have the humility to seek guidance when it is needed? Is pride or insecurity your obstacle to transparency?
- How well do you listen when seeking guidance? Does fear or impatience serve as your obstacle to humble listening?

Lifestyle: These actions steps are ways you can implement this step of personal decision making as a lifestyle. Having a lifestyle conducive to godly decision making is essential for (a) decisions that are incompatible with a formal process of decision making and (b) protecting the unity of your marriage in your personal decisions.

- Make a list of the relevant pieces of information that would influence your decision.
- Discuss smaller decisions with mutually trusted friends to create the habit of doing so for bigger decisions.
- Encourage each other to develop the kind of Christian friendships needed during this part of decision making.

Step Six: Seek God’s Guidance through Study and Prayer

It is assumed you have been praying regularly and studying Scripture throughout this full process. Daily prayer and study are the foundation for targeted seasons of prayer and study in the same way that healthy day-to-day communication in marriage is the foundation for targeted decision making conversations in marriage.

In steps one through five, we have gained a more robust understanding of the decision for which we are seeking God’s guidance. We are not educating God. Instead we are gaining the perspective often necessarily to appreciate God’s guidance. The best algebra teacher cannot force students to understand an equation if those students have neglected addition and subtraction. If we want God to guide us we should not demand He do so as we keep on blindfolds and refuse the maps He offers.

As you pray and study, here are six types of awareness that you should seek in Scripture and ask for from God.

1. **Spiritual Awareness:** Are there any sins associated with this decision (commission or omission)? What positive commands would be harder / easier to fulfill based on how this decision is made? What opportunities to have gospel influence would be created or lost based upon this decision?

As you seek God through prayer and Bible study on these kinds of questions you are filtering the decision through God’s negative and positive commands. While this should have been occurring from the beginning of the process, it is good to ask God to show you this again after gathering information (step five).

2. **Self-Awareness:** What are my motives (good and bad)? Which of these options best fit with the person God made me to be (talents, personality, experiences, etc...)? Does one of these options fit best a primary burden God has given me to advance His kingdom?

As you seek God through prayer and Bible study on these kinds of questions you are examining God’s design for guidance on “fit” and making sure that the temporal benefits of any given option have not distracted you from the first step of decision making – living for God’s glory. We are reliant on God to see and know ourselves rightly (Psalm 139:23-24; Jer. 17:9-10).

3. **Family Awareness:** What is God doing in the life of each of my family members (primarily spouse and children) and how would this decision impact that? What sacrifices would each family member be required to make and what opportunities would be provided? What does the response of my family members (i.e., fear, confusion, disapproval, excitement, etc...) reveal about how I should care for them after this decision?

As you seek God through prayer and Bible study on these kinds of questions you are seeking to remove the self-centeredness that often comes when we’re facing a hard decision – we tend to get lost in our own thoughts. In a marriage and family transitional decisions are never “just personal.” Caring for one another well after a decision is as much a part of God’s will as whatever decision is made.

4. **Church Awareness:** What is going on in the life of my church that would influence this decision? Can aspects of this decision support or expand particular ministries or emphases of our church? How have recent sermons and small group discussions related to this decision?

As you seek God through prayer and Bible study on these kinds of questions you are evidencing that the “family of God” (Eph. 2:19) really is your family. What God is doing through your church are often things He uses to guide your decisions. If God called you to be a part of a church, then His will for your life will be consistent with the mission of that church.

5. **World Awareness:** How can this decision be used to bring light into darkness in new ways locally or around the world? How does each option create or hinder opportunities to build relationships to share the gospel? Where is God least known in the different “sectors” of this decision and how could I be used of God to change that?

As you seek God through prayer and Bible study on these kinds of questions you are recognizing that God’s ultimate will is for His gospel to be proclaimed to every person on the planet and He intends to use His people to accomplish this (Rom. 10:5-15). It is impossible to seek God’s will without considering these questions.

6. **Spirit Awareness:** How do you feel led by the Holy Spirit in this decision? As I’ve asked for awareness in each of these areas, when have I felt God pushing me to [blank]? As I’ve prayed over this decision, [list] are the things I sense God is trying to accomplish in and through me with this decision?

As you seek God through prayer and Bible study on these kinds of questions you are expecting that as you ask God-centered questions the Holy Spirit will impress certain things upon you. We are not asked to do the Christian life alone with our Bible. God promises to be with us and guide us by His Spirit (John 14:26).

A natural question to ask at this phase in the process is, "How many forms of guidance need to be aligned for a decision to be 'confirmed' as God's will? Is it three, because that would be 50% majority rule? Is it, just one, because God doesn't need to repeat himself? Is it all six, because God is not a God of confusion?"

There is not a definitive answer. Not every decision will allow for each form of guidance. More areas of awareness would likely be relevant for a change of jobs that requires moving to a new city than merely moving within the same city. A decision about how many children to have would be impacted by more forms of guidance than what vehicle to purchase.

This is an important time to remember that you're not looking for the dead-center of the bull's eye; you are simply ensuring that you avoid sin and make a wise choice that embodies both God's heart for your unique life's circumstances. As you seek guidance through prayer and study, you are making sure you are taking the various aspects of the decision before God to see if any take on a heightened significance or passion as you do.

Assessment: These questions help you assess how well you are implementing this step of personal decision making.

- Do you pray and read your Bible regularly so these are not new disciplines during a time of decision?
- When you read your Bible do you reflect and when you pray do you pause to allow God to speak?
- Do you view yourself as belonging to your family, church, and the world in a way that their concerns impact your prayer life and decision making process?

Lifestyle: These actions steps are ways you can implement this step of personal decision making as a lifestyle. Having a lifestyle conducive to godly decision making is essential for (a) decisions that are incompatible with a formal process of decision making and (b) protecting the unity of your marriage in your personal decisions.

- Expand the amount of time you spend "quiet" (not reading or speaking in prayer) with God.
- Regularly ask each other how God is leading you to engage your family, the church, and the world.
- Regularly talk about times you believe God may be prompting you or your family to do something.

"'God told me to do this' or 'God's leading me here,' this puts our decisions out of reach from criticism or concerns. We should choose some different terminology. 'I prayed about it, and this seems best' or 'It seems like the Lord is leading' would be a more helpful way of communicating our dependence on God. We don't want 'God told me so' or 'God laid it on my heart' or 'It's God's will' or worse yet, 'God told me that He wants you to do such and such' to be conversation stoppers that remove accountability in decision making (p. 49)." Kevin DeYoung in *Just Do Something*

Step Seven: Decide with Confidence and Freedom

At this point God calls you to decide. Once you have prayed, studied, consulted, and researched to the degree that time allows you must make a decision. If you have followed this process (formally or informally), then you will have eliminated the immoral options and reflected on God's purposes for the situation. That means you're in the domain of Christian liberty and can make your decision with freedom of conscience.

You should also make the decision with confidence: (a) an expectation that God will bless and (b) the tenacity to make the decision succeed. Decision making does not end with the decision; it extends to the follow through on the decision. Timidity, laziness, or neglect on the back end of a decision are as dishonoring to God as apathy, cavalier-ness, or fearful paralysis on the front end.

It is important to realize we will not always be "right" in what we decide. Our decisions, even well thought-out and prayed-over, will not always achieve the desired result or go well.

"Decisions expose us to the risk of being wrong, yet whenever we allow that to control our obedience, we serve self rather than God... We must resist the temptation to try to use guidance to secure a life without risk (p. 241)." James Petty in *Step by Step*

Our confidence is in God's faithfulness and ability to redeem not our ability to master a process. Unless we have as much confidence in God's ability to redeem our failure as we do God's willingness to bless our successes, decision making will become a tense, performance driven activity that pushes us away from reliance on the gospel.

Assessment: These questions help you assess how well you are implementing this step of personal decision making.

- When the point of decision comes do you usually feel a sense of freedom and confidence?
- Can you resist the sense that you have been "demoted" to God's "Plan B" when a decision goes poorly? God doesn't have a "Plan B" for our lives; only "Plan R" (Redemption of our lives; our mistakes, sin, suffering, and successes).
- Do you feel God's love in the freedom He grants to allow you to make decisions based upon His design for your joy?

Lifestyle: These actions steps are ways you can implement this step of personal decision making as a lifestyle. Having a lifestyle conducive to godly decision making is essential for (a) decisions that are incompatible with a formal process of decision making and (b) protecting the unity of your marriage in your personal decisions.

- Evaluate "big decisions" where you use this full formal process. Use each step as a point of evaluation and learn more about your strength / weaknesses in "normal, everyday decisions."
- Discuss with your spouse the "small decisions" you made which have had a big positive impact on your life and marriage to remind yourself of God's faithfulness.
- When a "small decision" has significant negative consequences use it as a learning opportunity rather than a point of shame. Make this a habit in your marriage so that insecurity does not become a reason for secrecy in your marriage. Remember, the presence of secrets makes you less known to your spouse and will inevitably result in you feeling less loved by your spouse.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was not to give you a seven point protocol for every decision you make; neither was it to relegate intentionality only to the "big decisions" of life. Both mindsets are errors that negatively impact your walk with God and your marriage.

Instead, the purpose of this chapter was to give you a process of personal decision making that can become a lifestyle. You want these "steps" to become habits that can function as mindlessly as your morning bathroom routine or driving a car. But that you can give overt attention to when the "driving conditions" are bad.

This shared lifestyle of wise personal decision making will produce three types of trust in your marriage.

1. I find safety and comfort in your character – fidelity.
2. I believe you will follow through on what you say you will do – character.
3. I can rest in how you will respond to things we haven't discussed – wisdom.

As you and your spouse decide how you're going to implement the principles from this chapter, you are most reinforcing or establishing this third aspect of trust. You are making the unknown much less of a threat to your marriage.



Approach to Individual Decision Making

Step One: Live with Your "Yes" on the Table for God

- Do you believe your sin and folly require both the gospel and God's continual guidance for a satisfying life?
- Do you believe that honoring God in your decision making is the only way to lasting joy?
- Do you believe that God is good and, therefore, can be trusted to guide your life?

Step Two: Identify What You're Stewarding for God

- Make a prioritized list of your (a) relationships, (b) responsibilities, (c) talents, and (d) passions.
- How does your list compare and compliment the lists your spouse / fiancé made?
- What areas on your list are in transition or when do you anticipate the next transition in each area?

Step Three: Manage the Basics with Excellence

- Do you have a family budget that each of you understand, honor, and consider as you make decisions?
- Do you have common expectations for your time that protects your family and guides your decision making?
- Do you anticipate future decisions and transitions in light of these two basic life resources?

Step Four: Watch for Challenges and Opportunities

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Daily Opportunities | 3. Transitional Opportunities |
| 2. Daily Temptations | 4. Transitional Challenges |
- Do you have "normal" that mentally frees you to look for daily opportunities to obey God's positive commands?
 - What daily temptations most commonly make following God's will seem complicated or unrealistic?
 - What are the next anticipated transitions for your family? What opportunities and challenges will they bring?

Step Five: Pursue the Necessary Information and Counsel

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Those Who Know You | 3. Those Whose Character You Trust |
| 2. Those Who Know Your Situation | 4. Those Whose Wisdom You Trust |
- Who knows you and your life well enough to speak into a significant decision?
 - Do you have the humility to seek guidance when it is needed? Is pride or insecurity your obstacle to transparency?
 - How well do you listen when seeking guidance? Does fear or impatience serve as your obstacle to humble listening?

Step Six: Seek God's Guidance through Study and Prayer

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Spiritual Awareness | 4. Church Awareness |
| 2. Self-Awareness | 5. World Awareness |
| 3. Family Awareness | 6. Spirit Awareness |
- Do you pray and read your Bible regularly so these are not new disciplines during a time of decision?
 - When you read your Bible do you reflect and when you pray do you pause to allow God to speak?
 - Do you view yourself as belonging to your family, church, and the world in a way that their concerns impact your prayer life and decision making process?

Step Seven: Decide with Confidence and Freedom

- When the point of decision comes do you usually feel a sense of freedom and confidence?
- Can you resist the sense that you have been "demoted" to God's "Plan B" when a decision goes poorly?
- Do you feel God's love in the freedom He grants to allow you to make decisions based upon His design for your joy?

Evaluation: Consensus Decision Making

Note: Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

Instructions: Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. When I make decisions I consider how they will affect my spouse. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 2. When my spouse makes decisions he/she considers how they will affect me. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 3. I am patient and understanding with the pace at which my spouse makes decisions. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 4. My spouse is patient and understanding of the pace at which I make decisions. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 5. I am willing to sacrifice my personal dreams for the betterment of our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 6. My spouse is willing to sacrifice his/her dreams for the betterment of our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 7. We are willing to live simply enough to give time to the things that really matter. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 8. We agree on the distractions that interfere with our time priorities. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 9. We agree on the lesser priority things we are prone to which we give too much time. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 10. We have and continue to share the dreams that we have for our individual lives. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 11. We have and continue to share the dreams that we have for our marriage. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 12. We have and continue to share the dreams that we have for our children (if applicable). | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 13. We are intentional with and agree concerning the use of our time. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 14. We make enough time for personal and corporate worship to remain spiritually healthy. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 15. We make enough time for each other to remain martially healthy. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 16. We make enough time for personal and mutual friendships to remain relationally healthy. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 17. We make enough time for rest, exercise, and interests to remain personally healthy. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 18. We agree on the major variables to consider before making a decision. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 19. We can discuss decisions together without feeling like we are asking permission. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 20. We both consistently remember that our marriage is more important than a decision. | CD SD NS SA CA |

Key to Survey Scoring: For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the "neutral" NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

- | | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| CD – Negative 3 points | SD – Negative 2 points | NS – Negative 1 point |
| CA – Positive 2 points | SA – Positive 1 points | |

If your total score...

- ...**matches or exceeds the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...**is less than the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...**is a negative number**, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-20: (Total: _____ in 20 questions)

This set of questions examines the "**consensus decision making**" necessary for a gospel-centered marriage. Most decisions in marriage should be made on the basis of consensus. Over utilization of the headship-submission dynamic of a Christian marriage is an indicator that a couple needs to examine their personal character or work on creating more unity in their life goals.

Recommended Resources: *Who Does the Dishes? Decision Making in Marriage* by Winston Smith

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse's effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

_____ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for questions 1, 3, and 5.

_____ **Spouse's Score** – Using the same scoring system as above add together the score for questions 2, 4, and 6.

Chapter 4

Consensus Decision Making Process

Joint Decision Making Not Rooted In Headship-Submission

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Marital consensus requires enjoying your spouse more than you enjoy your preferences.
- Uncertainty is not the enemy of consensus. Uncertainty is when we become the enemy of consensus.
- Being motivated to make something succeed that was not your first choice is a clear indicator of love.
- An overly high view of consensus results in bland uniformity instead of enjoyable unity.
- Honoring the principles of consensus is what allows the energy of love to be magnetic instead of explosive.

Memorize: I Corinthians 1:10 (ESV), “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment..” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “I appeal” – Consensus decision making between sinners is unnatural and, therefore, requires intentionality.
- “Brothers” – The church (like marriage) has, but should not always rely on, authority structures to make decisions.
- “All of you agree... no division” – This is the ideal towards which we continually strive in the church and marriage.
- “United” – Being united means valuing your marriage more than whatever is at stake in a given decision.
- “Same mind... judgment” – The process and values of decision making are key factors in unity being enjoyable.

Teaching Notes

“To me, consensus seems to be the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies. So it is something in which no one believes and to which no one objects.” Margaret Thatcher

“I don’t know why we think that the most comprehensive and long-term of all human relationships can stay alive and thrive without the same commitment we make to our gardens. Perhaps one of the fundamental sins that we all commit in our marriages is the sin of inattention (p. 101).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“I often become so preoccupied with the duties and responsibilities of my marriage that I fail to nurture tenderness and passion in my relationship with my husband. I get so busy *servicing* him that I overlook *enjoying* him (p. 32-33).” Carolyn Mahaney in *Feminine Appeal*

“Love is the bedrock principle. No matter what your culture, traditions, or preferences are, the Bible teaches that in every relationship your first responsibility is to love (p. 3-4)... You can’t make wise decisions about how to love your wife if you don’t know what her life is like. You must know her hopes, dreams, fears, wants, strengths, and weaknesses (p. 11).” Winston Smith in *Who Does the Dishes?*

“If spouses are committed to one another’s pleasure, nobody goes to sleep disappointed (p. 160).” Dave Harvey in *When Sinners Say “I Do”*

“Love calls you beyond the borders of your own wants, needs, and feelings. Love calls you to be willing to invest time, energy, money, resources, personal ability, and gifts for the good of another (p. 188).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“If I’m married only for happiness, and my happiness wanes for whatever reason, one little spark will burn the entire forest of my relationship. But if my aim is to proclaim and model God’s ministry of reconciliation, my endurance will be fireproof (p. 36).” Gary Thomas in *Sacred Marriage*

Embedded Study

For some consensus is the epitome of all things good... “if only everyone could get along and agree on the kind of world that was best.” For others it is the encapsulation of all that is wrong with the world... “trying to get everyone to agree results in bland, sterile uniformity with no conviction or passion.”

When you consider anything significant out of context you will eventually reach those kinds of polarized positions. That is why we are considering consensus decision making in the context of individual and headship-submission decisions making.

Consensus is neither the Savior nor the villain of a marriage. It is that important middle ground between exclusive individualism (living as independent decision makers – “just roommates”) and corporatism (allowing all decisions to be decided on the basis of authority – “controlling”).

Most of the really enjoyable parts of marriage will be experienced through consensus. If we didn’t believe this we would be content to remain single (individualism) or would gladly give away our freedoms and voice in decision making. But you didn’t. You chose to get married because you thought “doing life with” your spouse was superior.

The goal of this chapter is to teach, or at least reinforce, the skills of consensus decision making so that this approach can comprise a larger and larger percentage of your marital decisions. The maturity of wise personal decision making (chapter three) is assumed and the necessity of headship-submission decision making (chapter five) is anticipated. But as often as possible, you should desire to decide together.

We’ll address this subject in three questions:

1. What do consensus and friendship have in common?
2. What decisions fit in the “consensus” category?
3. What is the process for consensus decision making?

Consensus and Friendship

Friendship is about more than liking the same things and agreeing on how things should be done; otherwise “opposites attract” would be jeered as an oxymoron instead of an accepted proverb. We all have friends who are different from us, yet somehow we enjoy one another more than we enjoy our preferences.

That is what marital consensus requires – enjoying your spouse more than you enjoy your preferences. It is a skill we all have; namely friendship. But marriage requires us to utilize this skill more often for more things of more importance than any other relationship. Friendship-fatigue and familiarity can cause us to neglect the fundamentals of consensus in our marriage; like fatigue can cause any athlete to neglect the fundamentals of his/her chosen sport.

In this section, we will review the fundamentals of friendship in terms of four values. Use these to increase your intentionality in using consensus skills, especially when we are prone to forget or neglect them. Throughout this chapter the terms consensus, friendship, and unity will be used as synonyms.

1. **Value the marriage more than the subject.** What makes it “safe” to have a conversation? The awareness that your spouse values the marriage more than the topic or outcome. Whenever a subject of conversation becomes more important than the relationship the opportunity for consensus is greatly damaged.

As you enter any decision making process each spouse will inevitably assess, “How important is this decision? How important is this subject to my spouse and how does that compare to how important our marriage is to my spouse right now?” Even if not overtly thought, this assessment will be made emotionally through the presence of a sense of safety / freedom or fear / defensiveness.

With increased significance of a decision comes increased pressure, often impaired thinking, and bad relational habits. A great way to balance the importance of any subject is to compare it to something more significant. We can establish an atmosphere where it is obvious the marriage is more important than the subject by the tone of our communication in the decision making conversation and frequently talking about what is good about the marriage in the times between decisions.

- What are the verbal and nonverbal indicators each of you give that indicate a subject is becoming more valuable (at least in that moment) than the marriage?
- What day-to-day forms of marital encouragement are most important for displaying a high value of relationship in your marriage?

2. **Value unity more than preference.** What is the difference between “friends” and “acquaintances”? One difference is that acquaintance-relationships are more dependent upon shared preferences for mutual enjoyment, while in friendship relationships take precedence over preference. Simply put, in friendship you don’t have to do things “my way” in order for me to enjoy / value our relationship.

The unity in a gospel-centered marriage reveals we are *about* the same things, not just that we *like* the same things. When preferences matter more than unity they become a “law” by which our spouse must be “good enough” in order to be (or at least feel) loved. That creates an environment of pressure and fear which stifles the free dialogue of consensus decision making.

- What are your strongest pet peeves and preferences (which probably emanate from your strengths)? How do you ensure that they are serving your marriage instead of expecting your marriage to serve you?
- What are the indicators that your marriage is “good” that have little to do with your preferences?
- What shared goals do the two of you have that are not the re-articulation of your personal preferences?

3. **Value relationship over certainty.** Consensus requires trust when the future is in doubt, because during decision making the future is always in doubt. Uncertainty is not the enemy of consensus. Uncertainty is when we become the enemy of consensus. Uncertainty is when we prefer to know rather than to love.

The reality is that consensus (or any other form of decision making) is only relevant during uncertainty. If our friendship skills fade during uncertainty then we will either be controlling or codependent during pivotal moments of any relationship – uncertainty.

- Picture a spectrum where trust is in the middle with naïve / gullible on one end and fearful / controlling on the other. Where are you? Where is your spouse? How does this affect your marital decision making?
- How strong are your “marital trust muscles”? When are the times when you should be intentionally exercising those muscles (i.e., relatively safe times of uncertainty)?

4. **Values participation over efficiency.** Decision making is quicker and easier when one person makes a decision. But that convenience comes at a cost; that cost is called “buy in.” A relationship without consensus can (most don’t) run like a finely tuned machine, but it will feel like a machine more than a romance if it does.

Longevity in marriage is about pursuing the same thing; ultimately Christ. Consensus decision making is when a couple refines what it looks like to functionally pursue Christ in the details of each new challenge and opportunity. The value of consensus for most decisions far outweighs the benefit of the time saved by efficiency.

- Which do you naturally value more: mutual participation or efficiency? For what kind of decisions does your normal preference change? Is that change made because of fear, ease, or wisdom?
- Do you have adequate time set aside for marital communication in order to allow for a larger percentage of marital decisions to be made through consensus? Do you manage the basics of life well so that consensus decision making time is not consumed by logistics?

Read Philippians 2:1-11. Notice the values that underlie Christian unity. Walk back through this passage and mark the phrases that support each of the four values of consensus described above. Realize that if unity is expected of a relational network as large as a church, it is even more expected in a relational network the size of a marriage and family. Pay particular attention to how we are dependent upon Christ in us to live the life Christ modeled for us (v. 5).

What Fits in “Consensus”?

Budget, home décor, job change, parenting strategy, dinner schedule, vacation, time devoted to hobbies, clothing purchases, what to watch on television, percent of income to save or give, which church or small group to join, accepting a new ministry opportunity, how many kids to have, how to discipline those children, etc... Which of these decisions should be made through consensus?

That may not be the best way to frame the question, but it’s where most of us start and it is an effective question to get us thinking practically about joint decision making. The question makes it sound like there are particular kinds of decisions that exclusively fit in one category. But life is not that neat.

Many consensus decisions are made independently. Once a couple agrees upon the family budget (consensus), they execute the majority of the budget in independent decisions. But this is still an expression of consensus. How to approach parenting

is a decision couples should make through consensus, but the couple will implement that parenting strategy independently on the basis of personal judgment more often than not.

A better way to frame the question would be, “How can we arrange our life so that as much as possible is decided through consensus? How can more of our decisions be made based upon pre-consensus so that we reserve active-consensus for more involved (i.e., planning a vacation) or weightier (i.e., potential job change) decisions?”

To start that conversation, it is important to divide consensus decisions into two levels.

1. **Level One: Life Stewardship (Pre-Consensus)** – Most of these decisions will be covered by discussing chapter three together as a couple. Once a couple articulates the values that will guide their homes, creates a budgeting process (not just a document), and agrees upon a realistic use of their time the majority of life is simply living out the plan. Trying to create consensus without these basic agreements becomes so tedious it is painful.

The early years of marriage and each season of transition (i.e., having a child, job change, retiring, etc...) are times when these basic life stewardship pieces have to be established or redefined. Once these agreements are made living consistent with them is more a matter of integrity and character than cooperative decision making.

Questions: Do the two of you have agreement about the values that will guide your marriage? Do you have both agreement and a functional method of implementation for how to manage your time and finances?

2. **Level Two: Unique Decisions (Active-Consensus)** – If you are applying these materials as they are designed, unique decisions will be where you apply chapters four and five. These are decisions that are not resolved by managing your time and money with shared values. Some of these decisions are “big” (i.e., what job to accept or ministry to embrace); others are “small” (i.e., how to decorate the house or which hobbies can be engaged). But they are more than resource management and value application decisions.

As you seek to determine what decisions fit in this category, here are some guidelines:

- Non-Moral Decisions – Preference does not reign over morality. If Scripture declares part of a decision wrong, the consensus of husband and wife does not trump God with a 2/3’s vote. If there is a moral component to the decision that should be resolved before a couple begins to seek consensus.
- Differing or Unclear Objectives or Preferences – This will be the majority of consensus decisions. A couple can agree to set aside 3 hours and \$50 for a date, but they also have to decide what to do on that date. A couple can agree on how to discipline defiance differently from immaturity in their children, but they will have to agree on which category a given unruly behavior fits into.
- Non-Rushed Decisions – Time pressure rarely allows for the cultivation of consensus. The more poorly a couple manages their time, the more they will force decisions into the individual or headship-submission arenas. We protect consensus by having realistic expectations for our time.
- Decisions Requiring Mutual Execution – When a decision requires the cooperation of both spouses it should be, as much as possible, made through consensus. If a couple is making decisions that require mutual execution predominantly through individual decision making, they are being inconsiderate and neglecting what it means to be in a one-flesh covenant. If the husband is making these decision predominantly on the basis of headship, he is wrongly “lording his position over” his wife (Matt. 20:24-28).
- Decisions Affecting Family Balance – No decision is an island, but some decisions affect rhythm and balance of family life more than others. The more a decision affects the family balance, the more the family should be involved in consensus decision making. These are excellent times for families to disciple one another in the areas of love, sacrifice, and other-mindedness.

What is the Process for Consensus?

So far we’ve established that consensus is an expression of marital friendship and provided some criteria for understanding what kind of decisions should be made through consensus. But we’ve neglected the big question, “How do we make consensus decisions? If this were always easy or natural, this chapter would be unnecessary. How do we ‘do consensus’ when we don’t naturally agree?”

We will provide some steps for the process, but as you read them realize they are meant to be guidelines not strict protocols. The more important or tedious a decision is the more formally you should use these steps. But in the average, day-to-day consensus decision these should be used as parameters to stay within more than footprints to trace.

If you find these steps hard to implement, then it may be helpful to review chapter two (listening) and chapter four (conflict resolution) from the “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Communication” seminar.

- **Step One: Define the Decision** – The most obvious things are often the easiest to overlook. You have to agree on what you’re deciding before you’ll agree on what you’ve decided. Frequently couples fail to reach consensus because they define the decision differently. The longer they talk (usually argue) the less they feel understood, the more unreasonable their spouse appears, hopelessness sets in, and bad decision making habits emerge. Defining what needs to be decided is an incredibly important first step.
- **Step Two: Listen to Each Other** – Wow! Brilliant! Is this step novel? No. Is this step revolutionary? Absolutely. The failure to listen well is the biggest obstacle to healthy consensus. You cannot be a good spouse and a bad listener. The degree to which you struggle as a listener is the baseline (i.e., bare minimum) for the level of challenge your marriage will face. Here are a three key points on listening and consensus:
 - Listening and Consensus Require Humility – When we already have our mind made up we listen-to-change. This is a form of pride. When we are open-minded we listen-to-understand. This is form of humility and honor.
 - Listening and Consensus Require Mutual Participation – For both spouses to have the opportunity to listen, both spouses must speak. Listening is a form of serving. It only stands to reason that if both spouses are going to serve one another (Gal. 5:13), each spouse must be served. Some people wrongly assume speaking and being served are prideful. They are essential to any mutual relationship.
 - Listening and Consensus Require Fairness – When a couple does not fairly represent the words or concerns of the other person healthy communication is destroyed. When the intent or content of communication is changed, then the distorting spouse is taking control of both information and emotions in such a way that prevents any decision reached from being authentic consensus.
- **Step Three: Differentiate Opinions from Facts** – It’s not that facts matter and opinions don’t, but each needs to be brought into the consensus process at different times and in different ways. First a couple must agree on the facts relevant to the decision. Otherwise communication will break down due to confusion or mistrust. Then couples can begin to weigh their differing opinions, but there is an important intermediary step before we discuss weighing opinions.
- **Step Four: Begin From Where You Agree** – Don’t start from where you’re furthest apart. If a zipper is stretched and hard to close, it doesn’t make sense to squeeze at the far end. You begin squeezing and tugging at the point nearest where the zipper is already connected. The same principle holds for building consensus.

Instead of transitioning from information gathering / sorting to decision making by “defining your differences” begin by listing where and how you agree. If after doing this your differences still seem larger than your agreements, then one or both of you likely have unrealistic expectations or are failing in your “life stewardship.”

Most often, if both of you are being mature, your areas of agreement will be larger than your areas of disagreement. Seeing this creates a sense of perspective and hope that allows you to engage your differences in an attitude of trust. When it’s obvious that you agree on more than you disagree, then “compromise” does not seem like nearly as uncomfortable of a concept.

- **Step Five: Assess What Is “At Stake” for Each Person** – Now you are ready to examine differences of opinion, value, and perspective. All honest, humble opinions are equally valid (manipulative, prideful opinions are not), but not all opinions are equally weighty. Start by asking, “What is at stake for each spouse in this decision?”

There is more “at stake” in a decision to homeschool children for the spouse who will serve as teacher. There is more “at stake” in a decision about adding something to the schedule for the spouse who lives under more stress. Both spouse’s opinions are important, but the spouse’s opinion that has more at stake should be given greater weight in the process.

This approach is more effective than merely picking the middle point between the two positions or alternating who gets their way each time as the method of “compromise.” If, as a couple, you cannot agree on how much the decision will affect each other, then you’re not ready to make a decision on the subject. In that case, your focus should shift almost exclusively to understanding each other rather than trying to arrive at a decision.

Weighing each decision towards the spouse who is more affected by the outcome is way to serve one another. It is evidence that the four values discussed under “Consensus and Friendship” are prominent in your marriage.

- **Step Six: Understand the “Win”** – It is easy to lose sight of the “win” in a consensus conversation. Consensus can easily be confused with a negotiation. In a negotiation you measure the “win” by asking, “How did I make out? How much of what I could have gotten did I actually get? Was there any benefit I could have held out for that I left on the table?” Those are great questions when you’re buying a car, but horrible when you’re making a decision with your spouse.

In a marital consensus conversation you measure the “win” by asking, “How did we make out? How did the outcome serve *our* family? Did we belabor the discussion to the point we cost *ourselves* more trust than this subject merited?” Compare those two sets of questions. Until you are asking these questions you are not able to receive the blessing God wants to give through marriage.

In light of this you can see that consensus does not always mean getting your “first choice.” Neither spouse may get their first choice, but if they both are genuinely asking the right question they’ll be content with the outcome. Asking these we-oriented-win-questions is what fuels the level of “buy in” that motivates both spouses to see consensus decisions succeed. Remember the motivation to follow through is as important as setting out in the right direction.

Being motivated to make something succeed that was not your first choice is a clear indicator of love. Keeping this in mind is what will make consensus “worth it” when individual or headship decision making would be easier. It is also what prevents your marriage from growing stale or feeling like a dry partnership.

- **Step Seven: Headship-Submission is Not Failure** – In a healthy marriage a larger and larger percentage of decisions will be made through Level One, Pre-Consensus and Level Two Active-Consensus. But this will never be 100%. That is by God’s design; not merely a product of the Fall. The fact that headship can be abused does not mean it’s off limits or the second class citizen of marital decision making.

We’ll spend the entire next chapter discussing how to make headship-submission decisions well. That chapter will assume an understanding and implementation of this chapter. Even when consensus is not reached, the values and processes of this chapter create the atmosphere in which headship-submission feel safe and are a blessing.

If you allow yourself to feel like utilizing headship-submission is failure, then several things will happen:

- Consensus becomes corrupted by fear rather than motivated by love. “There is no other way” is the language of fear. We are less confident in decisions made in fear, so we question them more. These questions of insecurity will undermine the confidence necessary to effectively implement many decisions.
- We wrongly begin to think we have a bad marriage. When we call “bad” what God calls “good” we experience false guilt. We feel compelled to hide or change things that could be enjoyed. We feel insecure about things for which God would have us be transparent.
- We begin to mistrust part of God’s design for marriage. As we will see in the next chapter, God lives in relationship (the Trinity) where both consensus and headship exists. We cannot place these styles of relating against each other without distorting our view of God and, thereby, diminishing our trust in Him.

Conclusion

So what should we do with this chapter? Strive for consensus. It is a good thing that builds the friendship of a marriage. As you strive for consensus, don’t just get caught up in the outcome – mutually agreeable decisions – but learn to value the process – learning about your spouse as you honor him/her in your differences. That is “how” consensus builds friendship.

While you strive for consensus because it’s a good thing, do not elevate it to the main thing. Doing so would rob you of your individuality. Thinking differently from your spouse would become a “problem to be fixed” because it interfered with perpetual consensus. An overly high view of consensus results in bland uniformity instead of enjoyable unity.

Never forget that the differences in your marriage are what create interest and energy. Honoring the principles of consensus is what allows the energy of love to be magnetic instead of explosive.



Approach to Consensus Decision Making

Consensus and Friendship

1. Value the marriage more than the subject.
 - What are the verbal and nonverbal indicators each of you give that indicate a subject is becoming more valuable (at least in that moment) than the marriage?
 - What day-to-day forms of marital encouragement are most important for displaying a high value of relationship in your marriage?
2. Value unity more than preference.
 - What are your strongest pet peeves and preferences (which probably emanate from your strengths)? How do you regularly ensure that they are serving your marriage instead of expecting your marriage to serve you?
 - What are the indicators that your marriage is "good" that have little to do with your personal preferences?
 - What shared goals do the two of you have that are not the re-articulation of your personal preferences?
3. Value relationship over certainty.
 - Picture a spectrum where trust is in the middle with naïve / gullible on one end and fearful / controlling on the other. Where are you? Where is your spouse? How does this affect your marital decision making?
 - How strong are your "marital trust muscles"? When are the times when you should be intentionally exercising those muscles (i.e., relatively safe times of uncertainty)?
4. Values participation over efficiency.
 - Which do you naturally value more: mutual participation or efficiency? For what kind of decisions does your normal preference change? Is that change made because of fear, ease, or wisdom?
 - Do you have adequate time set aside for marital communication in order to allow for a larger percentage of marital decisions to be made through consensus? Do you manage the basics of life well so that consensus decision making time is not consumed by logistics?

What Fits in "Consensus"?

1. Level One: Life Stewardship (Pre-Consensus)
2. Level Two: Unique Decisions (Active-Consensus)
 - Non-Moral Decisions
 - Differing or Unclear Objectives or Preferences
 - Non-Rushed Decisions
 - Decisions Requiring Mutual Execution
 - Decisions Affecting Family Balance

What is the Process for Consensus?

- Step One: Define the Decision
- Step Two: Listen to Each Other
 - Listening and Consensus Require Humility
 - Listening and Consensus Require Mutual Participation
 - Listening and Consensus Require Fairness
- Step Three: Differentiate Opinions from Facts
- Step Four: Begin From Where You Agree
- Step Five: Assess What Is "At Stake" for Each Person
- Step Six: Understand the "Win"
- Step Seven: Headship-Submission is Not Failure

Evaluation: Corporate Decision Making

Note: Each major section of the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage series will have a brief evaluation tool to help you assess your marital strengths and weaknesses. Complete the evaluation before reading the material, then review the assessment again after completing each section to learn the accuracy of your initial self-assessment.

Instructions: Read the following descriptive statements. Consider how well they describe your experience or perspective on your marriage. If you are engaged, consider how well they describe your courtship experience or your beliefs about what you think your coming marriage should be. Mark the answer that best fits how you respond:

(CD) Completely Disagree, (SD) Somewhat Disagree, (NS) Not Sure, (SA) Somewhat Agree, or (CA) Completely Agree

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. We trust each other to value the marriage more than personal interests or gains. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 2. We define each other's position clearly and fairly when we disagree on a decision. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 3. When we disagree we are patient and wait (when possible) to make a decision. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 4. When we disagree and cannot wait we first agree on how decisions will be made. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 5. We set aside time to discuss major decisions. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 6. We follow through on getting needed information and resuming conversations. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 7. I (husband) do not believe that biblical headship means, "I always get my way." | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 8. I (wife) do not believe that submission means, "I should never disagree with my husband." | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 9. I (husband) give my wife's preferences as much weight as my own when we disagree. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 10. I (wife) believe he gives my preferences as much weight as my own when we disagree. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 11. I (husband) seek to understand not only "what" my wife thinks but "why." | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 12. I (wife) trust my husband to make wise decisions for our family even when we disagree. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 13. I (husband) am willing to make hard decisions without being avoidant or harsh. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 14. I (wife) am willing to be supportive of my husband even when his decisions turn out poorly. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 15. When we make decisions together I feel like I have a voice and influence. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 16. When we make decisions together my spouse feels like he/she has a voice and influence. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 17. I give full effort to making decisions succeed/enjoyable even if they weren't my preference. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 18. My spouse seeks to make decisions succeed/enjoyable even if they weren't his/her preference. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 19. When we disagree I can still appreciate the differences that originally attracted me to my spouse. | CD SD NS SA CA |
| 20. When we disagree my spouse can still appreciate my difference that attracted his/her to me. | CD SD NS SA CA |

Key to Survey Scoring: For each set of questions tabulate your score using the following numerical values. The scoring is weighted with the "neutral" NS answer being a negative score, because if you have not defined or pursued important aspects of your marriage relationship it will negatively impact the marriage.

CD – Negative 3 points SD – Negative 2 points NS – Negative 1 point
CA – Positive 2 points SA – Positive 1 points

If your total score...

- ...**matches or exceeds the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage is an area of strength.
- ...**is less than the total number of questions**, then this area of marriage could use attention or refinement.
- ...**is a negative number**, then this area of marriage should be given immediate and concentrated attention.

➤ Questions 1-10: (Total: _____ in 10 questions)

This set of questions examines the "**corporate decision making**" necessary in a gospel-centered marriage. A couple will disagree, even on important decisions. There will be times when these decisions cannot be delayed until consensus can be reached. Honor, trust, and support in these moments is a powerful part of maintaining a gospel-centered marriage.

Recommended Resources: *Marriage Matters* (ch. 14) by Winston Smith; *This Momentary Marriage* (ch. 6-8) by John Piper

Sometimes within a marriage the problem is not one specific area or issue but an overall imbalance in the effort, skill, thoughtfulness, and awareness being put into the marriage. Below is a list of questions that reveal your perspective on your effort and your spouse's effort in the marriage. Use the same numerical scoring system as you used above. In this case, the closer your scores are to another, the more mutual (and typically healthy) the marriage.

_____ **My Score** – Using the same scoring system as above score the questions for your gender.

_____ **Spouse's Score** – Using the same scoring system as above score the questions for your gender.

Chapter 5

Corporate Decision Making Process

Headship-Submission as the Blessing God Intended

Plumb Lines: These are the “sticky” statements that capture the core messages of this chapter.

- Headship decisions begin with engaging a person, your wife, more than obtaining an outcome.
- Resist the temptation to expect that authority should do what only maturity can accomplish.
- Biblical authority exists for the good of those being led, not the pleasure of those who bear it.
- Marriage cannot be reduced to one style of decision making and be healthy.

Memorize: 1 Corinthians 11:1-3 (ESV), “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” As you memorize this passage reflect upon these key points:

- “Be imitators... of Christ” – Any God-given influence or hierarchy in human relationships is for Christ-likeness.
- “Maintain” – Paul is clear that this style of marriage relationship is to endure because it’s rooted in the Trinity.
- “Understand” – Paul is also concerned that this style of marriage relationship can be abused, so he clarifies.
- “Man... Wife... Christ” – Submission is not “just for women.” Men submit to Christ. Christ submits to the Father.
- “Christ... Husband... God” – The expressions of a husband’s headship should look like Jesus and God the Father.

Teaching Notes

“Marriages break down because people have no bigger vision for their lives than the establishment of their own little kingdoms (p. 259).” Paul Tripp in *What Did You Expect?*

“The irony is that every marriage settles into some type of social and organizational arrangement, with both husband and wife playing specific roles to uphold it. The question is whether these responsibilities should be defined by God who created marriage or by the opinions of humans (p. 165).” Dennis Rainey (editor) in *Preparing for Marriage*

“Remember, you [husband] are merely a steward of God’s authority, and you are called to use it only for his goals and purposes... As you follow Jesus, expect your authority to be costly. Exercising authority means laying aside your own welfare for the sake of others (p. 11).” Winston Smith in *Who Does the Dishes?*

“[Before Eve] Who does Adam have in his likeness to love, serve, and honor?... Interestingly, only himself! This was the main issue. He had only himself to think about, serve, and honor. This is what God called ‘not good.’ In his alone state Adam could not reflect the complete image God wanted Adam to reflect (p. 64).” John Henderson in *Catching Foxes*

“Confusion over headship and submission is often the result of a distorted understanding of authority... No matter how marital roles are defined, they are only different expressions of love... Loving your spouse in his or her role includes knowing your spouse, not just his or her gender, and valuing his or her individual gifts and abilities (p. 193).” Winston Smith in *Marriage Matters*

“It was clear to me that Tim wanted to take the call [to plant a church in New York City], but I had serious doubts that it was the right choice. I expressed my strong doubts to Tim, who responded, ‘Well, if you don’t want to go, then we won’t go.’ However, I replied, ‘Oh, no, you don’t! You aren’t putting this decision on me. That’s abdication. If you think this is the right thing to do, then exercise your leadership and make the choice. It’s your job to break this logjam. It’s my job to wrestle with God until I can joyfully support your call (p. 244).’” Kathy Keller in *The Meaning of Marriage*

Embedded Study

We’re now in a position to discuss headship-submission. From chapter two, we know what we’re after (God’s will). From chapter three, we’ve assessed how to make wise, mature personal decisions which lay a foundation for joint decision making. From chapter four, we’ve examined consensus as the preferred first-choice for how to make marital decisions. But those approaches will not cover everything.

The big question now should be, “What’s left? If we do a good job with what we’ve already learned, shouldn’t that take care of decision making?” Not every couple is asking that question, but for couples where there is general unity “what’s left” should be the tone of thought at this point. Otherwise you’re expecting authority to accomplish what only maturity can do.

But even with a mature couple there will still be an answer to the question, “What’s left?” Here is a list of the kind of things that are left.

- After deliberation a husband and wife still disagree about what should be done. Even in close marriages marked by trust and unity this will happen. It is not a sign of “incompatibility.” It just reveals that you’re two unique people living a one flesh relationship.
- Time constraints do not allow for a more collaborative decision making process. If this happens frequently, then it’s likely a sign of a time management problem. But in a busy world with many decisions there will be times when a decision must be made before much collaboration can occur.
- When a member of the family needs to be protected from their own choices. If the primary purpose of authority is to protect those under authority (more on that later), then this should be a primary expression of headship. Most of us want to do more than our finite body, schedules, budgets will allow. Headship is one of God’s protections for families against this tendency.
- When an uncomfortable example needs to be set for the family to follow. During times of sacrifice headship requires being the first to do without. A biblical view of authority is not the king who eats while his subjects starve, but the Son who set aside Heaven to become the Savior. Within the gospel sacrifice is the currency of leadership.
- When an important question needs to be raised that is currently being avoided. Leadership is first about insuring important questions are asked; it may or may not involve being the one who generates the answer. Frequently headship will involve asking questions about challenges that are being ignored or about assessing the progress of change agreed to previously.

For many couples this articulation of when headship-submission is relevant challenges pre-conceived ideas about what biblical gender roles ought to look like. It is much less about who is “in charge” and more about what are the unique ways a husband and wife love/serve one another in the midst of a difficult decision.

“When the solution to a problem seems to boil down to the question of who is ‘in charge,’ it means that more important questions aren’t being asked (p. 17).” Winston Smith in *Who Does the Dishes?*

There are three questions we’ll seek to answer in this chapter.

1. What Is a Biblical View of Authority?
2. How Should a Couple Make Headship Decisions?
3. How Should a Couple Follow Up on Headship Decisions?

A Biblical View of Authority

Read I Corinthians 11:2-3. Have you ever considered how God relates to God? Within the Trinity there is both unity and role distinction. The Spirit submits to the Son and the Son submits to the Father (John 5:30, 8:42). While on earth, Jesus even submitted to Joseph and Mary (Luke 2:51). This is authority as God intended, before sin messed it up, and what we are called to imitate. Those “under” authority are honored. Those “in” authority use their position for the benefit of those they lead. Anything contrary to this is an abuse of power.

Rightly understood the role of headship is more responsibility than liberty; accountability than license. Consider the business owner who hires a manager and gives him/her authority in the store. This position comes with the authority to make decisions (but not the expectation that the manager will make all the decisions; other employees will be involved). However, when it comes time to evaluate the store, the manager will be the one who the owner holds accountable.

When a couple begins to view headship as the freedom “to do whatever he wants” or “to get his way whenever we disagree” they are radically misconstruing what headship is about. Headship becomes a political power chip. Husband and wife are imagined to be “against” one another (not merely having differing opinions) when headship is relevant. Headship and trust become antonyms. The backdrop of their imagination is more war and debate than sacrifice and service.

Until this mindset is changed, headship will either be authoritarian with a strong tendency towards control or a crisis maneuver akin to breaking the glass on a fire extinguisher in a public building. Either way, headship won’t feel “safe.” A sense of safety about headship is essential to expressing headship as God designed and to promote trust.

Wise personal decisions, shared values, and sincere efforts at consensus prevent headship from being corrosive to trust. To state it bluntly, if this chapter were applied by itself (i.e., without the implementation of the preceding chapters) it would likely harm a marriage. But that is true of each chapter in this seminar. Marriage cannot be reduced to one style of decision making and be healthy.

How was your view of headship and authority different from the biblical picture of these concepts?

How does your expression of or response to headship and authority need to be adjusted?

What questions do you have about how headship should look in your marriage?

How to Make Headship Decisions

When it comes to making headship decisions it would be easy to engage the process (i.e., pursue an outcome) more than the person (i.e., serve your wife). This is a common mistake that results in great damage to marriages. Here are five key things a husband should have done or known before asserting his role in making a headship decision.

1. **Know your wife well.** If you do not know your wife well, three bad things happen: (1) your starting point will likely not be your wife’s starting point; (2) the process of making the decision will be marked by conflict or silence; and (3) the decision you reach is unlikely to serve your family well.
 - Start “leading” by asking questions and listening. Ask, “In your opinion what aspects of this decision are most important? What fears or dreams of yours are related to this decision? As we make this decision what are the most important things you want to see in me and want from me?”
 - If you do not believe you are an expert on what is important to your wife, return to the exercises given in chapter two of *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Foundations* seminar.
2. **Express honor in what you say and do.** Most abuses of power (i.e., manipulation) are unintentional. The person “with the power” simply phrases questions and defines words so that it is “obvious” things should go their way. This is form of dishonor, that intentional or not, is sin.
 - Realize headship is primarily expressed during times when you disagree with your wife, so be aware of the strong bias you have for your own opinion. Be on guard for how this shapes your words. Those with the power in any conversation bear the most responsibility for what they say.
 - If this is hard for you then review chapters two (listening) and four (conflict resolution) in the *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Communication* seminar.
3. **Institute healthy home policies.** Yes, this is getting repetitive. But a large percentage of issues that filter through to headship decisions are result of the absence of a shared plan for time, money, and values within the marriage. When these main things are agreed upon it is much easier to talk about everything else.
 - If you do not have a budget you jointly use, review chapters two and three of the *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Finances* seminar.

- If you do not agree on the time commitments within your family, review Appendix B of this seminar.
4. **Establish an environment of trust.** Trust is the difference between a hard, but good, conversation and an argument. Take advantage of every opportunity to serve and sacrifice for your wife, so that there is no reason for her to believe you are being selfish when you need to lead.
- One way to establish trust is to only respond to big deals as if they are a “big deal.” Over and under reacting are large trust breakers. Be aware of your tendency to either over or under react to situations and regularly ask your wife how you’re doing in that regard.
 - Show interest in your wife’s day-to-day activities and share about your day-to-day activities. The more “foreign” you feel to your wife the harder it will be for her to trust you in moments when leadership is needed.
5. **Initiate important conversations.** Difficult conversations that are brought to you have a much different tone than those you initiate. Passivity that forces your wife to initiate difficult conversations causes your leadership (often rightly) to be perceived as reaction to nagging rather than a thought-out response to a challenge.
- Beware of the lie, “If I bring up [blank] it will only upset my wife.” The longer [blank] is allowed to fester the bigger it gets. When [blank] forces itself into the conversation, and it will, the timing will be bad. As the leader of your family choose how and when these subjects will come into conversation.
 - Regularly ask, “Is there anything that we need to discuss?” Inviting a conversation is a legitimate way to initiate a conversation. Don’t use this question to bait your wife into starting a conversation you know needs to be had. But screening for things you may miss is a wise form of leadership.

This may sound like a great deal of work. It is work. Leading a family is an important job. Lazy men should not apply. These actions are not extravagant; nor do they represent the “Green Beret” of husbandry. These are the foundational actions and commitments which set the stage for a husband to exercise headship in a way that is a blessing to his marriage.

Now we need to look at the process a couple should go through in a headship-submission decision. These steps are directed primarily to the husband. But they can be used by a wife to articulate what she is looking for in her husband as he leads the family in a way that honors her.

- **Enact healthy individual and consensus decision making.** Personal maturity and honoring friendship are prerequisites for healthy leadership in marriage. In particular, taking the step to seek counsel from mutually trusted people is important so that the exercise of headship does not come across as an excuse for autonomy. This is also when and how a husband gains the information necessary to comply with the next two recommendations.
- **Articulate clearly your wife’s position or concerns.** A husband who cannot clearly express his wife’s position and concerns in words she would agree with is in no position to exercise headship. If your bias against your wife’s position is so strong that your articulation of her position is simplistic or condescending, then you lack the love to lead her as Christ leads His church.
- **Articulate clearly why this is important to her.** Every effort should be made to understand not only “what” your wife is thinking but also “why.” Be very leery of exercising headship over a decision when the “why” of your wife’s concern is unclear to you. Hearing her husband express both the “what” and “why” of her concern provides a level of security in her husband’s decision that is important for her godly responses to that decision.
- **Vocalize about what you’re weighing in the decision.** Leadership is not just about understanding, but also being understood. Let your wife know what you are weighing most heavily in the decision and the time line in which the decision is being made. Yes, this also means inviting questions about that process. If you are defensive about questions, you’re not a leader; you’re a dictator. This is an important part of setting your wife up to support the decision. If the wife is uninformed about the plan, when and how it will be implemented, it can produce perceived resistance or undermining on her part as she acts out of her confusion.
- **Request for your wife’s support in your decision.** Questions honor; demands or expectations dishonor. “I would ask that you support me in this decision and work with me to make it succeed for the good of our family,” is the tone in which headship should be articulated. A husband cannot force his wife to follow his leadership. When leadership takes on that tone it becomes an abuse of power. God calls a wife to voluntarily submit to her husband and does not give the husband jurisdiction to “enforce” that command.

- **Only choose your preference if...** “I’m convinced I’m right” cannot complete this sentence. The context of headship-submission decisions is disagreement, so you’ll always be convinced you’re right. Below is a list of criteria for when it is wise to exercise the role of headship. It is not exhaustive, but should help you further apply the idea that in the gospel leadership exists for the good of those being led rather than the pleasure of the leader.
 - Moral Protection – If the issue under discussion has a clear moral component, requesting your wife to submit to your preference (which should be the morally acceptable option) is a form of asking her to honor the Lordship of Christ. This is part of the role of husband as the pastor of his family.
 - Mission Drift – This is another area where the husband serves as pastor of his family. All families, like all individuals and organizations, drift off mission. The role of a husband as head of his family is to call the family back to their primary purposes: loving God, loving each other, and loving the world. This may involve drawing upon his role as head of the family to request focused attention in one of these areas.
 - Life Balance – A husband protects his family by making sure the pieces of the various family schedules can mutually exist. This is not technically moral protection, but excessive scheduling is an often overlooked cause of moral drift, overt sin, and family dissension.
 - Issue Warranting a Trust Withdrawal – This is the criteria used to establish the list above. In many cases utilizing headship to choose your preference will result in an initial decrease of trust. When you exercise headship and choose your preference you are saying this issue is “worth” that trust deficit. If you exercise headship well, then this withdrawal will be temporary and there will be a long-term trust gain.
 - If a difference of opinion does not meet these criteria, then it is advised that the husband defer to his wife’s preference more often than not in order to protect the level of trust in the marriage. If an issue is not “that important” then positional authority should not be leveraged as the deciding factor in resolving a disagreement.

Distinction: Obedience vs. Submission – Children are called upon to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1). A wife is called to submit to her husband (Eph. 5:22). There are many implications of this distinction, but one will be highlighted here. A husband does not have the authority to punish his wife for choosing not to submit to his leadership. Withholding finances, restraining social freedom, or other “grounding-like” actions are unbiblical for a husband to utilize with his wife. Whenever a husband-wife relationship takes on the quality of a parent-child relationship it creates problems that are greater than a lack of submission.

How to Respond to Headship Decisions

Which is harder, leading or submitting? Don’t answer. The correct response is “yes.” There is a great deal of weight and responsibility placed upon the husband as head of his family. But there is an equal level of importance placed upon the wife in her role of helper in her family. If we emphasize the weight or importance of one role over the other we do an injustice to the design and dignity God gives to both genders.

In this section we’ll speak primarily to the wife as we seek to answer the question, “How should a wife respond in situations where her husband exercises his role as head of the family in making a decision over which there is disagreement?”

Decision Making is not the only expression a husband’s headship should take. For other aspects of the husband’s role as head of the family see chapter five of the *Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage: Foundations* seminar.

Here are five responses a wife should have to a healthy expression of her husband leading in a decision. These are not “steps” but they do have an intentional order. If it is difficult for you to fulfill one of the earlier points, it will be very difficult for you to fulfill the latter points in a way that feels genuine rather than forced.

Note: These responses assume that the decision made is not sinful or dangerous.

- I. **Believe the best about your husband’s motivation in leading.** It is easy to view a leader who makes a decision you disagree with as ignorant, selfish, lazy, short-sighted, controlling, or as having some other bad motive. This tendency within the family is rooted in the effects of the Fall; after which God said to the wife, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you (Gen. 3:13b).” What she wants, a strong man to lead her family, she will also mistrust. Overcoming this tendency (trusting) is the core of a good response to your husband’s leadership of the family.

2. **Affirm the process even before you know the outcome.** One of the benefits of this chapter should be that you can have confidence in the process of decision making even before you know the outcome (which will inevitably be in doubt for a decision on which you disagree). Your husband will not always be right; in the same way individual and consensus decisions will not always be “right” (result in the optimal outcome). If this pressure – to always and immediately be right – is added to headship decisions, it will either contribute to passivity or control on the part of your husband. Look for opportunities to say, “Thank you for leading our family and doing it the way you did,” with a smile, eye contact, and an affectionate touch.
3. **Strive to make the decision succeed.** The level of effort you give to making the decision succeed should be as great as if your preference were chosen. Anything less would be a form of bitterness or resentment; a root of trouble for your marriage (Heb. 12:15). After the decision making process has concluded refrain from referring to the outcome as “his decision” in your own thinking and, especially, to others. What efforts this “striving” may entail will vary greatly based upon the nature of the decision, but you want it to be clear you are “all in” on what your husband believes is best for the family.
4. **Speak and think of the decision positively.** This is actually an extension of the previous point. One of the ways you can strive to make a decision succeed is to facilitate a positive morale around that decision. The words you use are important for: (1) you, as protection against grumbling or fear; (2) your husband, as protection against tendencies towards passivity or control; (3) your children, as they learn what it means to honor their parents and other authorities even when they disagree or don’t understand; and (4) your friends, so that they remain a positive influence in your marriage rather than a polarizing presence because they’ve “taken sides.”
5. **Offer feedback without questioning his role.** Submitting to your husband’s decision and joyfully striving to make it succeed need not necessitate silence regarding any concerns from that point forward. As with any decisions, the process and outcome will need to be evaluated, and you have many valuable things to add to that evaluation. One of the primary ways you can offer feedback without questioning your husband’s role is to use first person plural pronouns (i.e., we, us, our). “Some things we should consider for future decisions for *our* family are...” This displays the level of ownership and participation you took in the decision.

Word to Husbands: You protect your wife in her ability to display these responses by (a) not over utilizing your role as head of the family, (b) patiently utilizing the process advised to ensure she has voice even in decisions where you exercise headship, and (c) inviting feedback when you do exercise headship.

The willingness to learn and assess is a key part of humility for leaders, especially husbands leading their family. Realize that being heard after a headship decision is vital in maintaining your wife’s trust for your continued leadership of the family. Often you will gain more trust even if your decision proves ineffective and your wife is heard than if your decision proves effective and she does not feel heard.

Any time that you exercise headship in a decision you should invite your wife’s critique of these three areas. It is recommended that you ask the questions in this order; placing the critique of the actual decision last.

- **Invite a critique of the process.** Did you feel heard throughout the decision making process? Did you believe that I understood and valued your primary concerns? Did you feel informed about what factors weighed heaviest to me in this decision? Did you believe you knew what you needed to know about when and how the decision would be made and what needed to be done as we enacted the decision?
- **Invite a critique of your tone in leading.** Did you feel honored in our conversations about this decision? Did the way I ask you to support me in the final decision feel honoring to you? Did my expressions of gratitude for your support after the decision seem genuine; are there ways they could have been more encouraging for you?
- **Invite a critique of the decision.** Do you believe this has been a good decision for our family? Which of the things that weighed heavily in my decision have proven most and least relevant? Are there any adjustments (if possible) we need to make in the decision in light of what we learned since that time?

Conclusion

You’re concluding quite a journey of reflecting on how to make godly decisions as a married couple. Actually, you’re just concluding a study on the subject and you’re continuing on the decision making journey you’ll be on for the rest of your life. As you finish this study here are the objectives you should feel equipped to achieve.

1. Identify and articulate the challenges that make decision making hard or stressful for you.
2. Alleviate the pressure that comes with the “Bull’s Eye” mindset towards decision making and the will of God.
3. Differentiate when to utilize individual, consensus, and headship-submission decision making approaches.
4. Know and agree upon strategies you will use in individual, consensus, and headship-submission decision making.

This does not make life “easy,” as if following God’s plan removed all risk or uncertainty from your life and marriage. It should build trust between you and your spouse as you approach an uncertain future that will be inevitably be filled with many significant decisions.

What you want is unity in the midst of uncertainty; trust in the midst of adventure; faithfulness in the midst of following God into the unknown. That is what marriage is. If this seminar has equipped the two of you to protect unity, trust, and faithfulness as you seek God together until death do you part, it has served its purpose well.



Approach to Headship-Submission Decision Making

How to Make Headship Decisions

When it comes to making headship decisions it would be easy to engage the process (i.e., pursue an outcome) more than the person (i.e., serve your wife). This is a common mistake that results in great damage to marriages. Here are five key things a husband should have done or known before asserting his role in making a headship decision.

1. Know your wife well.
2. Express honor in what you say and do.
3. Institute healthy home policies.
4. Establish an environment of trust.
5. Initiate important conversations.

Now we need to look at the process a couple should go through in a headship-submission decision. These steps are directed primarily to the husband. But they can be used by a wife to articulate what she is looking for in her husband as he leads the family in a way that honors her.

- Enact healthy individual and consensus decision making.
- Articulate clearly your wife's position or concerns.
- Articulate clearly why this is important to her.
- Vocalize about what you're weighing in the decision.
- Request for your wife's support in your decision.
- Only choose your preference if...
 - Moral Protection
 - Mission Drift
 - Life Balance
 - Issue Warranting a Trust Withdrawal

Distinction: Obedience vs. Submission – Children are called upon to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1). A wife is called to submit to her husband (Eph. 5:22). There are many implications of this distinction, but one will be highlighted here. A husband does not have the authority to punish his wife for choosing not to submit to his leadership. Withholding finances, restraining social freedom, or other "grounding-like" actions are unbiblical for a husband to utilize with his wife. Whenever a husband-wife relationship takes on the quality of a parent-child relationship it creates problems that are greater than a lack of submission.

How to Respond to Headship Decisions

Here are five responses a wife should have to a healthy expression of her husband leading in a decision. These are not "steps" but they do have an intentional order. If it is difficult for you to fulfill one of the earlier points, it will be very difficult for you to fulfill the latter points in a way that feels genuine rather than forced.

1. Believe the best about your husband's motivation in leading.
2. Affirm the process even before you know the outcome.
3. Strive to make the decision succeed.
4. Speak and think of the decision positively.
5. Offer feedback without questioning his role.

Word to Husbands: You protect your wife in her ability to display these responses by (a) not over utilizing your role as head of the family, (b) patiently utilizing the process advised to ensure she has voice even in decisions where you exercise headship, and (c) inviting feedback when you do exercise headship.

- Invite a critique of the process.
- Invite a critique of your tone in leading.
- Invite a critique of the decision.

Appendix A

Dates from the Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage "Decision Making" Seminar

You will remember what you rehearse. You will rehearse what you enjoy. Marriage is meant to be enjoyed but requires rehearsing (i.e., remembering) the things that are most important. For this reason, each seminar in this series will provide a collection of dates that are designed to allow couples to review what they've learned. Two things you should note:

1. Each date can be taken multiple times. You and your spouse will change over time. Because you change, the same date, with the same person becomes a new experience. Marriage resists becoming stale when we enjoy anticipating and learning what God is doing in our spouse's life and marriage next.
2. Create the habit of reinforcing key marriage lessons with playfulness and romance. Learn from the content and pattern of these dates. Pick a section of this seminar that was useful to your marriage and create a date that allows you to review those truths in an enjoyable way.

Finding God's Will Date

Preparation: Make a list of all the things you felt pressure (past or present) to get "just right" because you felt there was only one possible outcome that could be God's will. Reflect on how this sense of pressure impacted your approach to each part of the decision making process.

Activity: Share your lists and discuss which ones (a) you couldn't imagine being different than they are, (b) have changed or will change several times over the course of your life, (c) you still feel pressure to get "just right," and (d) you're most comfortable trusting God to guide without a sense of pressure on you.

Ending: Go to a place that reminds you of God's direction over your life (i.e., the place where you "happened" to first meet your spouse, where a unique opportunity "happened" to present itself, etc...). Share the stories that come from that place and other ways God has been faithful in directing you without putting pressure on you.

Follow Up: In the coming days (hopefully creating an ongoing habit) verbalize the "little" moments when God is faithful to make decisions clear through wisdom and common events. Share how looking for these moments helps you live in less fear that you're going to make a mistake in some choice that will derail you off of God's perfect will for your life.

Goal for Date: To rest in God's faithfulness to lead His people more than you fret about missing His will. To cultivate more conversation in your marriage about God's faithfulness and daily guidance to decrease fears you may have about "big" future decisions (which is likely a source of anxiety for at least one of you).

Consensus Date

Preparation: Together, before the date, pick a marital enrichment event (i.e., anniversary trip) or home improvement idea that the two of you would both be excited about and the budget you'll have for this endeavor. Separately, before the date, brainstorm ideas for this event or project.

Activity: Begin by examining the different ideas that you each brought. Over the evening, use the process described in chapter four to decide when and what you'll do for this date or project. Allow the energy from planning a trip or project to add to excitement of an evening together.

Ending: Review the pieces that you took from each spouse's original set of ideas. Affirm the way your spouse honored you and took your ideas seriously. Point out ways that your spouse responded that were particularly encouraging and caused you to feel more willing to share and excited about the trip / project.

Follow Up: Go on the trip or complete the project. As you do, look for opportunities to affirm those aspects that came from your spouse's list of ideas and thank them when ideas from your list are implemented. Allow the process of consensus to magnify the enjoyment of the end product.

Goal for Date: To create an easy "win" for enhancing your consensus skills by being intentional with something you were probably going to do anyway.

Headship-Submission Date

Preparation: The husband should plan and arrange the date around his wife's preferences. The husband should identify one or two decisions or areas of growth needed in the marriage; consulting with his wife after writing his thoughts. The husband should ask his wife to consider the one or two items that remain at the top of the list. For this date, choosing items that could be resolved / decided in a couple of hours is advisable.

Activity: During the date the husband should share why he chose these areas of focus and ask for his wife's assessment of how they should be addressed. He should ask questions to understand why these things are important to her and/or seem most wise. Whether he agrees or not he should value what she says, feels, and values. Allow the setting of a date to temper any tension that might arise.

Ending: At the end of the evening (taking into consideration what he has learned from his wife), the husband should express to his wife what he believes is best for their family and ask his wife to support him in that decision. Together they should discuss how to implement that decision – time table, key points of cooperation, individual tasks, etc...

Follow Up: After there has been time to execute the decision, discuss how the roles of leading and supporting felt. What did each of you learn that gives you greater confidence in this type of decision making in the future? What could each of you do to better encourage one another in your role during these kinds of decisions?

Goal for Date: To serve as a "taste of success" for both the husband in leading and wife in supporting. Too often couples wait until a big / difficult decision emerges to practice this type of decision making. Their confidence and coordination, like an unpracticed athlete, are then awkward and they struggle to fulfill their unique roles in a way that is natural and promotes unity.

Appendix B

Creating a Time Budget

Note: This appendix is an excerpt from the booklet *Burnout: Resting in God’s Fairness* by Brad Hambrick.

Burnout is never caused by a single area of life. Burnout is a function of our total life management. One area of life cannot get out of order without overt choices of neglect being made other areas of life. This means that if we managed the others areas of our life well, it would have contained the area (i.e., work, ministry, parenting, etc...) that was the primary cause of burnout. We must resist the temptation to blame life, or even one area of our life management, for the experience of burnout. Burnout is a result of how we have managed our life as a whole.

So we might begin our assessment of burnout’s cause with this foundational statement—burnout is the result of living beyond our means with the time God has provided. It is common to say that someone is “living beyond their means” financially. There is a cultural epidemic of people spending more than they earn. The majority of Americans have a negative net-worth; we owe more than we own. We will use this parallel of financial and time management many times, so begin to think in these categories.

While financial insanity may be easier to track, time-management irrationality is probably even more pervasive and is an essential component to our financial folly. We must expect to pack more into life than is possible before we will try to force more into our budget than is possible. Our economy is based upon the exchange of time for money and money for stuff. Time is the primary commodity we spend and have expectations for. Money is only the currency (i.e., dollars) we have culturally agreed to use as a tangible expression of this value exchange. We pursue education and leverage our talents, so that our time will become more monetarily valuable. But this masks the fact that the only thing we truly have to “spend” is our life.

So what value does it provide to boil burnout down to time management? It forces us to acknowledge the reality that we live within a 24 hour day, a 168 hour week, a 672 hour month (based on a four week month), and a 8760 hour year.

The next question is, “What good does it do to know those numbers?” If we believe God is fair (this is where an accurate functional theology is essential), then God’s expectations of us fit within the time He has provided to us. Most of us do not live this way. We live with the driving mantra, “I have too much to do.” We live as if this “too much” carries the moral weight of God’s (or at least the “gods” we serve) expectation. We live as if God expects us to do every good thing that is asked of us and might benefit those around us.

It is easy for us to find 200 to 250 hours worth of good stuff to do in any given week... and that is without taking time to sin (which always takes or “robs” time). Honestly, the more Bible studies we attend and the better the preaching we sit under, the stronger this tendency becomes as we learn more of God’s mission to reach the world through His church. This accounts for the tendency to isolate from Christian community. We begin to resist hearing anything else that we could do (but we always here it as “should” do) because we have no mechanism to say “no” without guilt.

But the first thing God’s fairness requires of us is to rest in the fact that everything fits God intends for us to do fits in a 168 hour week.¹ This means that even if there are 200 hours worth of excellent things to be accomplished in a week, that you can have assurance at least 32 hours of your agenda is outside the will of God for your life; not “outside the will of God” in terms of being bad, but “outside the will of God” in the sense that God will accomplish this, if it needs to be done, through someone else.

¹ The time span of week is chosen here because it is the most common and manageable unit of time for most people to think within. For those with a swing shift or other irregular weekly schedule it may be more beneficial to think within a monthly time frame.

Budgeting Rest, Work, and Family

In order to think this way, you must have an intentional plan for how you use your time. Like a financial budget, it must be detailed enough to be useful, flexible enough to be practical, and looked at enough to alter your life. Let me begin by offering some general parameters for this time budget.² First, you should allocate at least 50 hours per week to sleep. This is a bare minimum of honoring the Sabbath command to express faith in God by resting a significant portion of each week as Winston Smith reminds us:

“There is one very important reason to slow down and rest. God commands it. In fact, resting is so important that it is one of the Ten Commandments... God’s command to rest forces us to acknowledge that God isn’t just in perfect control of his world, but ours as well. Resting means acknowledging that our world really belongs to him and we must entrust our well-being into his hands.”³

As we “set apart” (phrase intentionally chosen from the Hebrew word for “holy”) this time it should be considered an application of what it means to offer our bodies as a “living sacrifice” worshipping God through accepting the limitations of being a finite creature (Romans 12:1-2). This change may require a radical “renewing of the mind” for those who are moving towards burnout. It means acknowledging that *God honors our finiteness much more than we do*. Part of submitting to God’s Lordship over our life is to live within the limitations with which He created us.

Being finite is not the same as being selfish. For those who are motivated out of a sense of duty or people-pleasing, separating being finite and being selfish will be difficult. Accepting our limits is not the same as choosing our preferences over the preferences of others. By setting apart this time of minimal rest as “holy to the Lord” we are protecting ourselves and others. We must remember we don’t serve others well when we model an unhealthy, imbalanced life as their leader. Winston Smith illustrates this in his own Burned-out-Bob case study:

“Others avoided their responsibilities and relied on Bob instead of God. In effect, others were not growing because Bob⁴ was in the way! Like an overindulgent parent, Bob unwittingly handicapped the people he tried to love because his goal was their respect and approval, not their maturity. He allowed people to depend on him instead of God.”⁵

Second, you should budget around 50 hours per week for work. Even before the Fall, God called every person to productively use his/her life for the betterment of others and stewardship of creation (Genesis 1:28). Allocating these hours may be easier for someone who works an hourly job than for those who are business owners, independent contractors, or full-time parents. But some limit must be put on this sector of life or our defeating motive (i.e., greed, ambition, people-pleasing, guilt, perfectionism, etc...) will expand this aspect of life until it destroys the others. When the rest of life is destroyed, productivity loses its purpose.

Third, you should budget at least 17 hours per week for marriage and family. This number is chosen a bit arbitrarily, but it represents a tithe (10%) of your time devoted to family.⁶ Being part of a family will strongly influence your usage of the rest of your time. This 17 hour time allotment is a recommended minimum amount of time to set aside for exclusive focus on

² “General parameters” does not mean one-size-fits-all. There are many factors that could alter these recommendations (i.e., chronic pain, having a disabled child/parent to care for, or providing as a single parent, etc...). The advice given is based upon the majority population’s balanced life of sleep, work, relationships, service, and recreation.

³ Winston Smith, *Burnout: Trusting God with Your To-Do List* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2009), 5 and 9.

⁴ The “Bob” in Winston Smith’s booklet is not the same “Bob” in the case study that began this material. But the same name was chosen to create consistency between different fictitious case studies.

⁵ Smith, *Burnout*, 19.

⁶ If you are single, then this time allotment should give you a minimal expectation of what kind of sacrifice should be expected when/if you marry. If you are married without children, then you need to realize the time you have devoted to marriage will begin to be split between spouse, child, and family as a whole.

family. If you are married with children, it would very difficult to have “quality” time with your family if this “quantity” of time is not being met.

“Family time” does not merely mean “in the same building at the same time.” A useful definition of “family time” would be “investing my full attention in something that affirms my spouse or child by allowing me to know them better and makes them feel more known by me.” What kind of activities fit this description will vary widely based upon factors such as personality, interest, age, and season of life. But the main point is that family time reinforces and strengthens the sense of knowing and being known within the family.

Budgeting “The Rest of Life”

Fourth, if you follow the recommendations above, that leaves 51 hours to be allocated for “the rest of life.” The other parts of life should feel “holy” (set apart by God) before the week begins. In the first 117 hours of the week you are merely looking for the most situationally-wise and enjoyable way to accomplish rest, family time, and productivity. It is only in these last 51 hours that we should feel an additional degree of freedom about how to use them.

For many people this mindset will be uncomfortable, but when we call ourselves “God’s servant” and claim to live “under the Lordship of Christ” this necessarily places a limit upon our freedom. Within the first 117 hours we are free within the God-given role of finite creature, spouse-parent, and productive worker. Within these last 51 hours we are called to do maintenance, service, and recreation.

- **Maintenance:** This involves cleaning one’s home, mowing the yard, going to the grocery, paying bills, and the other mundane activities necessary for life. In this area, a grandmother’s advice on home cleanliness provides sound guidance for all areas of life maintenance, “A home should be clean enough to be healthy and messy enough to be happy.”
- **Recreation:** This involves the kind of activities that you find rewarding and replenishing that place you in the mental, physical, and spiritual condition to serve God and others. Here the advice is to know yourself—what restores you, gives you energy, or relaxes you? Whatever these things are should be a regular part of your schedule.
- **Service:** This involves service through your church to the congregation and community for the purpose of spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth and deeper into the lives of those around you. The discussion that follows will focus primarily upon this area since that is the particular area of life that this booklet is designed to prevent from becoming a contributor to burnout.

No recommended percentages or time allotments can be given for these three areas. But it should be noted that all three are essential to healthy living and should be given time. Healthy relationships are those that actively help you guard and honor balance in all three of these areas of involvement.

To help you assimilate what we have covered to this point, it is helpful to return to the parallel of a financial budget. A good financial budget should divide your various expenses into four types:

1. **Fixed Necessity:** These are expenses that are essential for living (necessity) and are the same each month (fixed). This category would include mortgage, insurances, or minimum debt payments.
2. **Variable Necessity:** These are expenses that are essential for living (necessity) and are not the same each month (variable). This category would include groceries, gasoline, or the power bill.
3. **Fixed Luxury:** These are expenses that are not essential for living (luxury) and are the same each month (fixed). This category would include various memberships, cable packages, or non-essential monthly subscriptions.

4. **Variable Luxury:** These are expenses that are not essential for living (luxury) and are not the same each month (variable). This category would include going out to eat, irregular entertainment expenses, and clothing beyond basic attire.

In a normal family budget, necessity expenses (categories one and two) will comprise 75-80% of the total income. This means that we only make monthly decisions about 20-25% of our income (that is *if* we have made wise choices about our expenses). The rest was decided in our necessary life commitments (and debts). Similarly, the majority of our time usage will fit under the category of “necessity” (the first 117 hours which are God’s minimums for healthy living) and the minority we have greater personal discretion (the last 51 hours spent based upon the “luxury” of personal preference within God’s design and mission).

The financial budget example is particularly helpful for this last 51 hours. A good financial budget seeks to balance fixed luxury and variable luxury spending. If the luxury spending is skewed towards fixed expenses, then it will lack the flexibility necessary to be practical. When all “fun” is “planned fun” there is no room for life and you’ll either break or resent the budget. If the luxury spending is skewed towards variable expenses, then it will likely lack the balance necessary to capture the interest of the family as a whole. Each month members will battle for “their things” and the budget will become a battle ground rather than a document of peace.

Side note: Often a life headed towards burnout will result from the absence of a wise budget. The more expenses we take on, the more time we must sacrifice to acquire that money. Eventually we spend ourselves to the point that we must work ourselves into burnout to meet our financial commitments.

Generosity vs. Sacrifice

The notion of variable and fixed luxury spending with finances forces us to ask what categories we should use in dividing these last 51 hours. Variable and fixed are useful, but I believe there is a more basic distinction to introduce first: generosity and sacrifice. It is admitted that the distinctions made here are tailored to the purposes of this booklet and are not inherent within the words themselves. But if burnout is to be avoided this distinction is essential regardless of what terminology is used to label it.

- **Generosity:** Planning to give more of the last 51 hours to serving God and others than we are comfortable doing and learning to find our joy in this service. C.S. Lewis makes this point about finances:

"I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities [giving habits] do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say that they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charities [giving] expenditure excludes them."⁷

This time allotment should be worked into our general time budget. Generosity, like luxury spending, should be balanced between two types.

- **Fixed “Planned” Generosity:** These are commitments within your last 51 hours (generosity) that require regular—daily, weekly, or monthly—participation (fixed). These commitments should be in your areas of passion and gifting to ensure that your regular, ongoing service is a source of life for you in addition to being a blessing to others. These commitments should only be accepted after a review of your time budget and in consultation with your family. Fixed commitments should not comprise the totality of your generosity time.
- **Variable “Spontaneous” Generosity:** These are commitments within your last 51 hours (generosity) that are one time events or only require periodic involvement (variable). These commitments usually arise from the needs of your family, friends, small group, or church at large. You

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001 edition), 81-82.

should have time designated (this means creating a lifestyle where are able to be available) for responding to the needs of those around you.

- **Sacrifice:** Cutting into the first 117 hours for crisis needs. This type of activity should be relatively rare because it is unsustainable. Sacrifice is good only when it is sacrifice and not a way of life. Generosity is as close as sacrifice can get to a way of life and remain healthy. The financial parallel is again helpful. It is foolish to give the money for your house payment to pay someone else's mortgage. You are simply trading foreclosures. When you dip into the first 117 you are tapping into what God has said is required to live healthy. To tap into this on a regular basis is not a virtue (an act of faith in God) but either an act of pride (believing you are the exception) or fear (being blinded by circumstance to God's design for life). When sacrifice is made, it should be done (1) in consultation with a community of trusted Christian friends, (2) in concert with the efforts of one's church, and (3) only on a defined, short-term basis.

The Example of Moses and Jethro

Much has been said about time management, its influence upon burnout, and how we should approach the subject. But we must admit there are few places in Scripture where the subject is addressed directly. One of the places where time management and burnout are addressed most directly is Exodus 18 where Jethro observes how Moses, his son-in-law, was trying to manage his responsibilities with the children of Israel.

His words, which were recorded in Scripture as an example to follow (making them more than good advice from an old man), provide an invaluable principle:

Moses' father-in-law said to him, "*What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace.*" So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. (Exodus 18:17-24; emphasis added)

Most often this passage is used to teach the importance of delegation. That is an accurate application of this passage and one that is relevant to the subject of burnout. But in light of the discussion of this material, there is a principle that comes before the application to delegation—if something becomes a way of life and is not sustainable, then it is not "good" no matter how "necessary" it may be.

Moses was solving disputes for people who had no problem solving skills—their people had been slaves and lived by master's orders for 400 years. Moses was, humanly speaking, responsible for them being in this new found dilemma of freedom. Moses was doing a good job, as best we can tell, at making good laws and rulings. Obviously people liked what he has to say; they kept coming to him for advice. It was all good, because it was effective, and it was all bad, because it was not sustainable.

To use the language and categories we have developed, Moses was going past being generous with his last 51 hours and was beginning to regularly sacrifice his first 117 hours. Someone close enough to Moses to see what was going on and who cared enough to speak spoke up. It was life changing. Moses, who got hand written messages from God on a mountain top, thought it profound enough to record in his book. Actually it was his passion for the message and mission Moses received from God on the mountain top that blinded him to the burnout he was barreling towards.

It is on the basis of this principle of sustainability that the generosity-sacrifice distinction is made. Generosity within a well-planned and monitored life is sustainable. Occasional sacrifice within a well-planned and monitored life is sustainable. When we do not have a well-planned and monitored life, then our service to God runs the risk of degenerating into "reckless

giving” in “blind faith” to “emotionally compelling” situations without defined limits on our ability to give—serving beings to consume the servant.

Making a Time Budget

If we do not begin to put pen to paper then all of this will be nothing more than good intentions and fancy talk. Crunching numbers is only the first step towards application, but it is a necessary step. The number crunching phase will come in two parts. First, we must examine how we are currently living. How many hours are we trying to cram into one 168 hour week? As we see this, it will allow the adrenaline, fatigue, and guilt we feel to make more sense. Second, we must prayerfully consider how God would have us divide our 168 hour week during this season of life.

The tool on the next two pages is designed to help you make this assessment using the categories and approach that has been outlined in this material.⁸ The first page is a sample time budget for someone describing their life “as is.” You will quickly notice that the budget is 25 hours overdrawn before anything has a chance to go wrong during a “real” week. This person wrote their schedule based upon a weekly schedule and only used the monthly column for non-weekly activities (i.e., taking a two hour date with their spouse every other week).

When using a document like this, you cannot itemize everything that you do. This is especially true for those who have the spiritual gift of multi-tasking. Notice that things like “general chores” are lumped together as one line item. In order to actually apply a budget like this, you will likely need to schedule some of the core functions of our time budget (i.e., Wednesday is laundry day; Friday is grocery day; every other Saturday is date night).

Another essential mindset change is that your family will have to begin to think as a collective unit (we) instead of a collection of individuals (me). Family schedules do not exist as independent islands. Most commitments that each family member makes affect the schedules of the other family members. This other-mindedness creates excellent discipleship moments with the children and maybe the most effective pre-marital counseling your children ever receive.

Step 1: To get used to using this tool start by using the far right column to write in the changes you would suggest to this friend if they came to you asking for advice on how to live within a realistic schedule. As you do this, you will realize afresh that living within a realistic schedule means cutting some “good” things. Starting with a generic example should help you get ready to do this with your personal life.

Step 2: Complete a time budget based upon the time commitments that you are currently trying to fulfill. PDF copies of the time budget form can be found at www.bradhamrick.com/burnout. It may take three to four weeks of observing yourself before you are confident you have an accurate representation of what you’re trying to accomplish. But start by getting your best guess on paper and then revise it as you observe yourself through the next couple of weeks.

Step 3: Makes notes about where changes are needed and begin discussing them with family and friends who will be affected. If you try to make changes in your personal life without talking with those whose lives will be influenced, then you are setting up conflict that will either aggravate your sense of guilt or the tendency to isolate from those who “don’t care about or understand you.” Both tendencies will fuel burnout and are likely a product of their ignorance that there is problem more than their entrenched demands upon you.

Step 4: Put your revised and realistic time budget on paper. This is not a for-all-time document. If it lasts for six months, you will be fortunate. But having a working copy of where you are now will allow you to make effective changes as life evolves without having to read through materials like these again. The work you have done to this point will serve you well even when your current time budget is completely obsolete.

⁸ This tool is modified and adapted from a similar resource created by James Petty found in his book *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians*.

Time Budget (Sample)

Activities	Type				Time		Changes Needed
	Essential	Energy Giving	Energy Taking	Planned Generosity	Hours Required in 7 days (168)	Hours Required in 28 Days (672)	How to Make Needed Changes
Nightly Sleep					49		Start with 50/week or 200/month
Family							Minimum 17 hours/week
Meals together (10 per week)	x	x			5		
Family devotions	x	x			3		
Attend/serve church together	x	x			2		
Play time with kids	x		x		7		
Date night	x	x			1	4	
Time with spouse	x	x			7		
Work							
Base work hours	x				40		
Commute to/from work	x				10		
Overtime			x		5		
Side jobs for extra \$			x		5		
Maintenance							
Getting ready for the day	x		x		5		
Exercise			x		3		
House repairs & yard work	x		x		1	4	
General chores	x		x		4		
Doing the budget	x		x		0.5		
Recreation							
Sleeping in or nap	x	x			2		
Personal devotions	x	x			3.5		
Sports league		x			2		
Watching television					14		
Ministry							
Lead small group	x	x		x	2		
Preparation for small group	x		x	x	1		
Other ministry		x		x	2		
Spontaneous generosity			x		3		If no time put here, then always "in the way"
Other							
Talking to parents		x			2		
Kids' sporting events			x		5		
Miscellaneous					9	35	5% for general inefficiency of life
Total Time I've Planned					193		
Time God Has Provided					168	672	

Time Budget (Blank)

Activities	Type				Time		Changes Needed
	Essential	Energy Giving	Energy Taking	Planned Generosity	Hours Required in 7 days (168)	Hours Required in 28 Days (672)	How to Make Needed Changes
List All Your Activities							
Nightly Sleep							Start with 50/week or 200/month
Family							Minimum 17 hours/week
Work							
Maintenance							
Recreation							
Ministry							
Spontaneous generosity							If no time put here, then always "in the way"
Other							
Miscellaneous					9	35	5% for general inefficiency of life
Total Time I've Planned							
Time God Has Provided					168	672	

Appendix C

Small Group Accountability Questions From the “Decision Making” Seminar

How do small marital problems become big marital problems? There are two primary ways: (1) they get ignored, and (2) they are dealt with alone. Ask yourself these questions about any case of divorce or chronic marital unhappiness you know:

If that couple had addressed their struggle early on with the love and perspective of fellow Christians, how different would their life be now? How many generations would be blessed? How much pain and suffering would have been alleviated? How much sin and destruction would have been averted?

The condition of Christian marriage is a church problem. When the church does not fulfill the one another commands of the New Testament, every marriage in that church suffers (even the good ones). Excellent, crisis-based pastoral counseling (no matter how effective) will not have near the impact as small groups regularly asking one another simple, fundamental questions about “Creating a Gospel-Centered Marriage.”

For this reason, every seminar in this series will contain a series of accountability questions to be used in the small group life of our church. It is suggested that at least once per month any small group with married couples divide men and women for the prayer time and ask one of the questions below. These questions are written in the first person plural (i.e., we, us, our) to imply that every person in the room should have an answer.

Chapter 1

- Which style of decision making (individual, consensus, headship) do you most over/under use in your marriage?
- Which of these 20 challenges creates the most tension or angst in your marriage?

Chapter 2

- How are you prone to over or under emphasize God’s sovereign, moral, and individual will in decision making?
- When are you prone to use the “Bull’s Eye” mentality towards decision making and experience undue stress?

Chapter 3

- Which of the seven steps of decision making are you most prone to neglect or get stuck on?
- What decision are you making where this would be useful so that we can encourage you as you use this process?

Chapter 4

- Which of the values of consensus / friendship are you most prone to neglect?
- What decision are you making where consensus would be useful so we can encourage you in this process?

Chapter 5

- Couple: What areas of your life do you need to manage better so that decisions do not unnecessarily get pushed into the headship-submission category?
- Husband: What aspects of the responsibilities of a husband as head of his family do you need to grow in?
- Wife: What aspects of how a wife responds to her husband’s leadership do you need to grow in?

Rebuttal: Wow! That seems really personal for a small group discussion.

Response One: It is not more personal than a divorce is public. And, it is not more personal than the Bible calls for us to be transparent about our sin.

Response Two: Once you have done this for three months and seen the benefits to your marriages, you will laugh at the defensive rebuttal. Accountability is only scary like swimming lessons are scary for a child. Putting your face in the water is only intimidating until you do it. Then you realize a whole new world of freedom and fun awaits.

Appendix D

What Do I Do Now?

A plumb line of the Summit counseling ministry is, “We don’t do events; we create resources.” That means you should be asking yourself, “What can or should I do with this information now?”

We have created a series of brief videos that answer that what-now question from several different perspectives. Each of these can be found at:

www.bradhambrick.com/whatnow

Personal Study or Small Group

Question: I’ve been to several of the Summit counseling seminars and notice there appears to be a couple of different kinds. You frequently recommend studying them as a small group or with a friend. That seems like a great idea, but since I haven’t done that before I’m not quite sure how to start something like that. Do you mind giving me guidance?

Pursue Personal Counseling

Question: After attending this seminar I realized I would like to pursue counseling to help me grow in this area. It sounded like there are several different options available. Would you mind explaining to me what those are and how I could connect with the one that best serves me need?

Leveraging My Workplace

Question: I’ve heard rumors that I’m supposed to be able to use the Summit counseling seminars to leverage my workplace for gospel influence. My first impression is that it sounds awkward and intrusive; like I’m telling people they’ve “got issues” or “need help.” But I’m also worried about putting up Christian material that might be offensive to some people who visit my workplace. But I would at least like to hear what you’ve got to say. How would this work?

As a Professional Counselor

Question: I’m a licensed counselor (LPC) and came across the Summit counseling seminars. I’m excited to see the church addressing these kinds of subjects, and I’m curious how you might see someone in my position (or a LCSW or LMFT) using the materials. I can see recommending them to my clients who are open to an overtly Christian aspect to their counseling, but it seems like there could be more uses than just counseling homework. Could you share your thoughts on how those in private practice might use these resources?

Our goal in Summit counseling is to (1) equip the church to care for one another and our community with excellence; (2) provide quality counseling services that allow our people to get involved in the lives of others with confidence – knowing additional, experienced care is available to come alongside them if needed; and (3) create ways for our members and other Christians in our community to leverage their workplace and careers for greater gospel impact in their spheres of influence.

We hope this seminar and these videos give you a vision for how this can happen and stirs a passion in you to be a part of God’s work of redeeming and restoring hurting individuals and families.