

# Ministry Focus Paper Approval Sheet

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THE INTERACTIVE DECISION-MAKING MODEL DEVELOPED THROUGH  
INTEGRATING THREE CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITIES

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BY

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## ABSTRACT

### **The Interactive Decision-making Model Developed through Integrating Three Christian Spiritualities**

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As a generation of Millennials enters adulthood, it faces a more rapidly changing society than any previous generation. Often, Millennials have to make decisions among many complex choices. Through offering a decision-making model, this project hopes to bring divine reality into people's routine and empower believers to discern God's presence in their lives. Therefore, the purpose of this doctoral project is to develop a three-step decision-making model emphasizing the interaction between humans and the divine to promote an intimate walking with God among young professionals in Southern California.

To accomplish what is intended, this paper examines community needs in terms of ministry context, describes current issues and debates on divine guidance, and evaluates some of the pitfalls in contemporary decision-making practices. In addition, there is a literature review on three decision-making models: The Blueprint Model, The Wisdom Model, and The Relationship Model, presents the Evangelical views on this subject. Moreover, the spirituality of desert fathers, Ignatian spirituality, and the thoughts of Dallas Willard are studied for their contributions to divine guidance. Therefore, based on the integration of three Christian traditions, an alternative decision-making approach: The Interactive Model is proposed. This model lays out seven theological principles, provides practical guidelines, and explores different ways that God can be experienced in the decision-making process.

To implement this model into a decision-making practice, this project provides a six-week teaching seminar as well as a two-day retreat to help participants discern God's guidance. During the retreat, each is guided through a three-step practice: preparation, reflection, and confirmation. A group of ten-to-fifteen people is recruited from the Hill Church at Irvine for a pilot study, and the findings are reported in this paper. In the end, this model is also evaluated to see if it is applicable to other Christian groups.

Content Reader: Keith Matthews, DMin

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To my dear wife Becky, and my lovely daughters – Emily and Amanda, for their tireless support and enthusiastic encouragement

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PART ONE  
MINISTRY CONTEXT

## INTRODUCTION

Everyone makes countless decisions during his lifetime, ranging from some routine choices such as what to wear or eat to more significant decisions such as whom to marry or which career path to pursue. All desire to make wise decisions, however, since no one knows the future, it is natural for people to seek divine guidance in their decision-makings in order to secure good fortune in this life. Regardless of one's beliefs, people keep looking for signs, clues, and any other means available to them in the process of making critical life-changing decisions.

The reason people become so careful in times of critical choices comes from their life experience. For example, Jack, a thirty-year-old professional, went through a short-lived and painful divorce recently and regretted his decision of letting go of his first love in high school. At their class reunion, he ran into his high school sweetheart who is happily married to his best friend. He ponders what his life would have become if he had not refused her some years ago.

Amy, another example, is a middle-aged single mother who often finds herself struggling at meeting ends. She wonders if she made serious mistakes in her life, such as pursuing a modeling career instead of a college education and bearing a child without a family commitment. Once again, her choices led her into a difficult life that she would rather have not chosen otherwise. Unwise choices led to misfortune in this life and it is imperative to make sound decisions at all times.

Among this quest of seeking guidance, there is a Christian insight, which offers practical guidance to ordinary people for decision-making. Christians have been long

fascinated about discerning God's guidance in their decision-making process, as it is firmly believed that God intends to bless his children not to do harm, and "His ways are higher than our ways and his plans are better than our plans" (Is 55:9).<sup>1</sup> However, by bringing God into this decision-making process, it does not make things easier, rather it becomes more complicated. People begin to ask how to know what God desires in their lives for a specific decision. They also want to know how to be certain that this is not a delusion or deception in receiving of God's guidance. The process of discerning God's guidance can be very tricky or even perplexing at times.

For this reason, many great minds throughout church history have contributed to the subject of discernment. In the twenty-first century, numerous books and articles have been published on this subject, and seminars or workshops that offer promising results have drawn a great multitude to attend. Therefore, the quest for seeking divine guidance never fades. Apparently, in this age of confusion, people are hungry for divine wisdom in the midst of their life crises. Certainly, with streams of rich spiritualities of Christianity over the course of thousands of years, the Church has much to offer to this generation in their pursuing of divine guidance.

Unfortunately, among Evangelical churches there is not much teaching about the doctrine of divine guidance. Often a simple formula is offered to believers when such a topic is brought up, for example, looking for certain signs or wonders to make choices. On one hand, people do not know what to do with a simple formula when facing complex situations. On the other hand, Christians seem lost in the literature as they deal with

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture in this paper come from *The New International Version*, except those indicated otherwise.

seemingly conflicting theories. Therefore, Christians today become confused in discerning God's guidance. It is the intention of this paper to offer an integrative and interactive model of decision-making based upon Christian teachings of the desert fathers and mothers, Ignatius, and Dallas Willard. In addition, this model is adaptable to help new believers and seekers in their journey of seeking God's guidance in this challenging age.

The Chinese are accustomed to looking for divine guidance to make decisions in their daily life. As many have immigrated into the United States in recent decades, they naturally come to the Church for spiritual guidance. Through accompanying them in their journey, the Church turns the Gospel message into a lived experience of God's grace. Therefore, this becomes such a good opportunity to lead them to the faith in Christ. In addition, for believers, teachings of discernment may deepen their Christian beliefs and help them experience genuine union with the Triune God. Therefore, the purpose of this doctoral project is to enable believers or seekers alike to be aware of the presence of God in their daily life and empower them to make good decisions as they grow in the faith and love of Christ.

This project is carried out in The Hill Church at Irvine, which was born with a vision that God empowers his people to reach out to younger generations in surrounding neighborhoods. This new church reaches out particularly to the Chinese community with a mission to proclaim the Gospel to both Chinese-speaking and English-speaking young adults and bring many in the neighborhoods to become faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Therefore, this project enables the church to train her members to experience God in the process of seeking divine wisdom among critical choices they face every day.

In a word, this doctoral project is an experiential program to reach out to the Chinese community in Orange County, California by helping them in decision making with a three-step practice: preparation, reflection, and confirmation. This new model, emphasizing the interaction between humans and God is developed through integrating the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers, the Ignatian Exercises and the thoughts of Dallas Willard.

This paper is to survey contributions on discernment from the three Christian spiritualities mentioned above and integrating these insights into a proposed new model. For the desert dwellers, discernment is not a method for making good choices rather it is the way of life. They were concerned with discernment more than anything else in their spiritual growth. Therefore, decision-making was not an isolated event and was put into the context of their whole lives the way God intended.

Ignatius contributes significantly to the Christian understanding of human desires and feelings and he makes good use of these insights in the discerning process. Unfortunately, Evangelicals have often disregarded human emotions as unreliable in discerning divine guidance. Ignatius invites people to journey into the depth of their souls to find God since he considers the movements of human emotions as signposts that God directs. This kind of experience proves to be helpful as people try to discern God's guidance among many complicated choices.

One of Willard's contributions to an evangelical understanding of the spiritual life is that the Kingdom of God is here and now, becoming available to all Christians for their spiritual walk with God. Instead of delivering a simple formula to dissect God's will, he strongly encourages Christians to develop a conversational relationship with God, which

is dynamic and interactive in the decision-making process. By doing so, Willard takes the approach of seeking guidance from a mechanism level to a personal relationship with the Triune God. Without this conviction in mind, any decision-making model may lead to a danger of deism.

To prepare for integrating a new model, Chapter 3 of this paper discussed and evaluated three decision-making models. First, the Blueprint Model is wide spread among Evangelical circles because of the popularity of the book, *Experiencing God*.<sup>2</sup> The authors argue that God has a specific plan for each of his children, so it is important for believers to discover this roadmap and make decisions according to God's perfect plan. Second, the Wisdom Model denies the existence of such a specific plan, claiming that good decisions can be made based on the wisdom revealed in the Bible alone. Finally, the Relationship Model intends to discern divine guidance by listening to God's voices. However, this method can only be possible through practicing spiritual disciplines and developing an intimate relationship with God. All three models have offered insights to aid basic understandings of current issues and debates on divine guidance, but none of them can be directly applied to this doctoral project and the relevant target group. For this reason, a new model must be developed for this study to guide participants of the HCI project (a pilot study to test the validity of this new model) in their decision-making practices.

The new model proposes a three-step approach and a pilot study was carried out over six-session teaching seminar and a two-day retreat. Instead of promoting techniques

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<sup>2</sup> Henry Blackaby, Richard Blackaby and King Claude, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2008).

to find God's guidance, this new model aims to develop a paradigm of discerning God's guidance through the alignment of people's minds and hearts with those of Christ. The whole procedure involves three steps: preparation, reflection, and confirmation. For this reason, this decision-making model is interactive in nature: firstly, reflecting on the true self, then contemplating with the Triune God, and finally meditating on the circumstance. By doing so, this model intends to guide participants to achieve their inner peace, notice desires and feelings in their heart, discover unique ways of God's communication with them, and reach decisions in a context of God's intention for their whole life.

Therefore, through learning from all three Christian spiritualities, this interactive model takes a focus on people's orientation toward God as a starting point, cultivates the relationship with God in the process of seeking, and maintains a balance between biblical teachings and experiential practices. For all the efforts devoted to this project, it is desired that whoever comes to seek divine guidance is about to bring God's glory through his or her life. "Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Eph 5:17).



## CHAPTER 1

### A NEW GENERATION IN A MORE COMPLEX WORLD

People who lived a hundred years ago could not imagine the complexity of choices in today's society. On the positive side, this offers good opportunities to live out life's great potential. On the other hand, it creates a huge burden of unnecessary anxiety to choose wisely. The world is rapidly changing, for better or worse, the landscape of American society has radically shifted in last decades, witnessing significant impact on the political atmosphere, demographic distribution, shared ethical values, and economic system. There are good reasons to believe that Millennials are witnessing a world totally different from that of preceding generations. This paradigm shift demands believers consistently to discern well among many choices in their daily challenges so that they may live out the best for Christ.

#### **Living in the Ever-changing World**

The financial crisis in 2008 shaped American society and the Western world more than any other recession in history, because it signaled a transition from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, from the ideology of free trade to the progression of globalization, from the dominance of the superpowers to a much-diversified world order.

In spite of steady economic recovery in recent years, some of American workers have permanently lost their jobs. It is noticeable that the shrinking of the middle class affects the way millions of Americans live now and how they perceive their future.

### Employment and Financial Decisions

Even for those who are employed, there is not a sense of employment security as before. The massive loss of American jobs due to global competition is well beyond a simple fix. It is estimated that America has lost one-third of its manufacturing jobs since the 1990s, and some blamed this loss on US trade policies, growing trade deficits with Mexico, Japan and Canada, and particularly China's unfair subsidy behaviors. According to the study by the Center for Business and Economics Research at Ball State University, the US lost about 5.6 million manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2010, but 85 percent of these jobs losses are attributable to technology change—largely automation—rather than international trade.<sup>1</sup> Few business are exempt from this global competition as well as an explosive invasion of new technology, and almost all households are affected one way or another in terms of career choices and financial decisions.

The good news is that the unemployment rate has dropped to 3.9 percent in the month of July 2018, which is the lowest in a decade.<sup>2</sup> As economists predicted, the job market continues to improve in the near term. The US Census Bureau reported in September 2017 that real median household income was \$59,039 in 2016, exceeding any

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Lehmacher, "Don't Blame China for Taking U.S. Jobs," *Fortune Magazine*, November 8, 2016, <http://fortune.com/2016/11/08/china-automation-jobs>.

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Labor, "Labor Force Statistics Among the Current Population Survey," *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed August 10, 2018, <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>.

previous year.<sup>3</sup> This is the fourth consecutive year with a statistically significant increase by their measure. However, this increase does not keep up with GDP growth (Figure 1 in Appendix A) and rising consumer prices in recent years. As prices of energy, food and housing rise steadily across the country, American households do not benefit much from this booming economy. As a matter of fact, the purchasing power is gradually declining. For this reason, more than ever people are longing for divine guidance since the future seems totally out of their control.

In addition, American corporate culture has shifted dramatically in the last thirty years. Prior to the 1980s, employees were inclined to remain in the same place for their entire career life. Meanwhile corporations such as Merck, AT&T, and Merrill Lynch intended to be family-oriented. Corporations viewed their employees as good assets for the future success of companies. However, the disappearance of this loyalty between corporations and employees made job changing more frequent. As a result, millions of Americans move across the country each year due to job relocation or other reasons. As each family moves, dozens of important decisions need to be made, such as debates of buying or renting, the location of a new home, public school or private school, choices of a local church and social groups, and other similar choices. Some of these decisions are time-sensitive, and thus make people more stressful in the decision-making process. For this reason, decision-making becomes a critical part of people's lives during the time of rapid changes in American society. Participants of the HCI project have to make similar

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<sup>3</sup> Sho Chandra and Jordan Yadoo, "US Household Income Rose to Record in 2016 as Poverty Falls," *Bloomberg*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-12/u-s-household-incomes-rose-to-record-in-2016-as-poverty-fell>.

decisions as changing jobs or careers become a major choice in their personal lives. In addition, many of their decisions are financial-related.

### Political Landscape and Diversity

Political atmosphere is another factor adding more stress in decision-making. The election year of 2016 proved to be a very difficult decision for Americans to choose their president. From primary to general election, candidates in each party represented such diversified political views, which portrayed the reality of the political landscape in today's America.

Today's Republican Party is predominantly a Midwestern, white, working-class party with its geographic epicenter in the South and interior West. Today's Democratic Party is a coalition of relatively upscale whites with racial and ethnic minorities, concentrated in an archipelago of densely populated blue cities. In both parties, there's a gap between the inherited orthodoxy of a decade or two ago and the real interests of today's electoral coalition. And in both parties, that gap between voters and policies is being closed in favor of the voters – a slight transition in the case of Hillary Clinton, but a dramatic one in the case of Donald Trump.<sup>4</sup>

It is believed that Americans live in a more diversified society than any generation in the nation's history, and there is no sign of this trend slowing down soon. What is happening in California (Table 1 in Appendix B) will soon become a pattern for states in other parts of this country, since the US population is expected to grow continuously. Even for those who share the same faith, there are no clear-cut in political standing points. Therefore, it is quite a challenge to make one decision-making model to fit well with such a diversified population. Any approach of decision-making must consider this demographic diversity

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Lind, "This is the Future of America Politics Looks Like," *Politico Magazine*, May 22, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/2016-election-realignment-partisan-political-party-policy-democrats-republicans-politics-213909>.

in the society and make its way of seeking divine guidance more applicable to the general audience.

Finally, moral values have been shifting to some extent that American society is largely divided over ethical issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, legal-use of marijuana, and human cloning. In a sense, the Judeo-Christian ideals of morality, once being fundamental values in Western culture, are no longer regarded as standards for the well-being of human societies. Even worse, those values become marginalized as liberal groups such as the LGBTQ community continue to push their agenda and advance their claims even to a point of dominating American culture to some degree. In another sense, ethical decisions are no longer considered a personal choice; it is not rare for Christians to be caught up in this debate as they weigh in options, deciding what is the best in term of their Christian faith. The participants of the HCI project experience this political shifting in their personal lives since moral values, social standing, and the American cultures that they are living in significantly influence many of their decisions.

### **Demographic Analysis of Orange County, California**

Most Millennials are not attending the church regularly. It seems that everyone knows this, since this happens throughout the country, but no one seems to know what to do about it. According to Gallup's estimates, about 21 percent of American have no religious identity in 2016, up from 15 percent in 2008.<sup>5</sup> It appears that those raised in the

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Newport, "Five Key Findings on Religion in the U.S.," *Gallup*, December 23, 2016, accessed August 10, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/200186/five-key-findings-religion.aspx>.

Church will be disengaged by the time they reach twenty-nine years old. Other studies confirm a trend: Millennials (18-29 year-olds), who were raised in the Church, are leaving in droves.<sup>6</sup> This age group is always less likely to attend church, but for Millennials things are different as they are not coming back at an older age. Compared with previous generations, Millennials became more influenced by the age of Internet, and social media plays an important role in how they relate to one another and determines the way they think, behave, and live differently from older generations. As a result, fewer are getting married, settled down, and even less they want to have children.

Housing prices in Southern California continue to rise, according to estimates by *Los Angeles Times*, as of June 2018, the median housing price in Orange County rose to a record \$738,500.<sup>7</sup> This is the result of price hiking for seventy straight months, and there is no sign to drop in near future. With the concern of job security and financial resources, it is no surprise that Millennials prefer renting than owning property. The US Census Bureau also provides a breakdown by self-identified ethnic groups as above (as of March 2014), even for the highest earning group, the cost of owning may take up to 40 to 50 percent of monthly income (see Table 2 in Appendix B). For the lowest earning group, it even seems impossible to own a decent home within the range of an affordable price. Therefore, it is understandable that this generation opts to live a free lifestyle, no burden of mortgage, property tax, and association dues.

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<sup>6</sup> Preston Sprinkle, "Why Are Millennials Leaving the Church in Droves?" Preston Sprinkle, September 17, 2015, <https://www.prestonsprinkle.com/blogs/theologyintheraw/2015/09/why-are-millennials-leaving-the-church-in-droves-part-1>.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Khouri, "Southern California Home Prices Hit Another Record High," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-home-prices-20180621-story.html>.

## Community Context and Decisions

Irvine is an affluent city located in the heart of Orange County, well known as a master-planned city over the development of several decades. As of 2018, its population is estimated at 276,176, which is one of the fastest growing cities nationwide, and one of the highest Asian residents in the nation (45 percent as of 2018).<sup>8</sup> As new neighborhoods continue to be built in available farmland and a former airbase, city population has grown 25 percent since 2010, and is expected to top out 302,900 by the time of its build-out sometime after 2025.<sup>9</sup> To attract Millennials, the city plans to build more condos and high-rise apartments to offer an urban living style with a variety of shopping, dining, and entertaining places.

Irvine is also known as one of the safest cities in the nation. With sponsorship of Irvine Company, the city offers many excellent schools, and attracts many young families moving into the area for their children's education. In addition, Irvine serves as a major business hub in Orange County, with the University of Irvine as the largest employer, and other nationally well-known businesses choosing the city as their business home. For this reason, Irvine is predicted to continue booming even after its build-out.

A high percentage of people living in the city have college degrees, many young adults are either visiting scholars or young professionals. At this stage of life, Millennials and the generation after them face a lot of critical choices, such as choices of college or career, choices of their dating relationship or their future mate, transitions between jobs,

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<sup>8</sup> City of Irvine, "Demographics: The City of Irvine," *City of Irvine*, accessed August 10, 2018, <http://www.cityofirvine.org/about-irvine/demographics>.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Mueller, "Irvine Won't Max Out for Decades", *Orange County Business Journal*, October 13, 2018, <https://www.ocbj.com/news/2012/oct/13/irvine-wont-max-out-decades>.

and choices of a living place for benefit of career or family. For example, an engaged couple, Jenny and Eric (code names) must make a series of decisions during their two-year courtship. By no means, these choices can be taken as minor decisions. By means of a timeline, they must: decide the right person to marry; the timing of marriage and planning the wedding; the decision of buying or renting a place; the location of home and financial commitments; the location and stability of jobs; the decision of going back to school for advanced study; the choice of discipline to study in graduate school; the decision of a career move or change in the next couple of years; financial commitment with parents-in-law; the timing of having a baby after getting married; the way to raise kids with help from grandparents; if there are troubles getting pregnant, the option of in vitro fertilization or adoption; the choice of a local church after getting married; the degree of involvement with a local church. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list, but no doubt these decisions will shape the rest of their lives and have a crucial impact on their family and extended family. Therefore, the objective of this doctoral project is to provide a biblical model for guiding people like them to make wise decisions.

#### The Hill Church at Irvine

The Hill Church at Irvine (hereafter, HCI) was founded June 20, 2017 as a group of Christians felt called by God to build a new church in Irvine. They intended to build a spiritual home in the midst of new neighborhoods, training members to become followers of Jesus Christ, and providing a safe space for a spiritual rest while having fellowship with one another. This was so that each one of them could continue to grow into the fullness of Christ.



The purpose of HCI, organized as an autonomous local church in accordance with the New Testament, is to glorify God through three avenues: proclaiming the Gospel in the local community; baptizing and training believers to become followers of Jesus Christ; and bringing the Gospel message to people in Orange County and beyond (Mt 28:18-20). In order to achieve this purpose, HCI is built around four core ministries for the spiritual well-being of her members: small group ministry, biblical training ministry, counseling ministry, and soul care ministry. Each of these core ministries is correlated to accomplish the stated purpose of the church.

This doctoral project is a part of the biblical training ministry at HCI, providing a practical opportunity for church members to seek God's guidance through discerning spiritual movement in their hearts and listening to God's voice in times of choice. The combination of a six-session teaching seminar and a two-day retreat ministers both biblical knowledge and experiential practices for participants to experience God in the process of decision-making. In addition, a new model introduced in this doctoral project provides theological principles and spiritual insights integrated from three Christian traditions to achieve its objective of knowing God intimately in seeking divine guidance. Considering differences in spiritual maturity among church members, this new model allows flexibility of adapting those suggested disciplines as each one engages.

Many decision-making methods are designed for Christians or even for seasoned Christians to seek God's guidance. People may wonder if this proposed model fits well with new converts or Gospel seekers. There are several reasons to support the idea that a decision-making model is necessary to be adaptable for different levels of Christians.

First, people make decisions no matter where they are on their spiritual journey, new or mature believers, even seekers. It is not profitable for anyone to leave Christian faith out of the equation in their decision-making process. Therefore, it is a responsibility of the local church to teach divine guidance and provide biblical guidelines for members and seekers alike in the process of their decision-making.

In addition, God meets people where they are. If people come to seek guidance, God does not turn them away easily. Rather he is always delighted to reveal himself according to their limited capability of understanding. Through his divine grace, God does not want to overwhelm or intimidate his children; neither does he want to conceal divine wisdom. Unless there is serious sin against God like the case of King Saul (1 Sm 28:6), there is no biblical witness that God refuses to answer petitions from those new to Christian faith. Instead, throughout church history, new converts have reportedly experienced God in remarkable ways.

Third, spiritual maturity is a privilege, not a prerequisite, in seeking God. To be a Christian or even a mature believer does not guarantee easy success in discerning God's guidance. Likewise, new believers and seekers cannot be easily discounted as they seek God's wisdom in decision-making. It is common that seasoned Christians may make bad choices and new believers may make good decisions, both scenarios have been observed in real life. Therefore, it is imperative to develop a decision-making model to fit well with the target members at HCI.

## **Orientation of A Discerning Community**

HCI primarily consists of first-generation immigrants from China or Southeast Asia. Some church members became followers of Christ before they moved to America, and others accepted Christ as their personal savior in this country. Since they all grew up under the influence of Confucianism, the church is devoted to teaching the Scripture for Christian living and conduct. For this reason, this project becomes a part of developing strategy of HCI in training church members to follow Christ intimately.

There are three sub-groups in the church: the first is the senior group (60 and up); they were born overseas and immigrated to the US after spending most of their adult life in their birth places. The second group is the middle-aged group, which consists of blue-collar workers without college education including caregivers, restaurant workers, and small business owners. The third group includes college students, scholars, or young professionals; they may have college education overseas and came to America either for advanced degrees or successful careers. Despite the diversity at HCI, everyone faces similar challenges of making life-changing decisions that are profitable and please God.

### **Typical Life-changing Decisions**

In general, there are three types of decisions in seeking God's guidance: the first is marriage: choice of marriage at different stages of life. Singles including divorcees, widows, or widowers are always struggling with this issue. The second is career: choice of colleges, the field of study, or jobs. This is not only relevant to young people, but also important to those who want to make a career change later in life. The third is Christian service: choice of involvement with a local church. People desire to make contributions

to spiritual wellbeing of their community, but stressful jobs and family responsibilities make it difficult, if not impossible, to devote more time in a local church.

Singles in the senior group still ponder if they want to pursue romantic love in this stage of their lives. While there is no more career concern, they consider if they should return to their home country for elderly living. The two other groups usually deal with all three types of decisions, especially for those who came for the American Dream, it is crucial to make a wise career move in this foreign land. No matter where they are on the spiritual journey, they all desire to seek wisdom from God, whom some hardly know personally. It is common that in times of critical decisions even the least pious person may call on the name of God for help, so this is the perfect time to reach them with the message of true God and salvation.

This project deals with personal decisions; however, this does not mean that this discerning process has nothing to do with the Body of Christ. Instead, a faith community plays a significant role in this decision-making model. The Blackabys point out, “One of the problems many evangelical churches face today is that they have so emphasized the doctrine of the priesthood of believers they have lost their sense of corporate identity.”<sup>10</sup> For this reason, before any discussion on discerning God’s guidance in decision-making process, it is essential to build up biblical fundamentals in this faith community. As it is pointed out:

Because a church is the body of Christ, it functions best when all members are able to share what they sense God wants the church to be and do. Members of a church cannot fully know God’s will for their lives in the body apart from the

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<sup>10</sup> Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, 201.

body. A church also needs to hear the whole counsel of God through its members. Then it can proceed in confidence and in unity to do God's will.<sup>11</sup>

In order to do so, each member must find her basic alignment within the faith community to discern divine guidance. Therefore, this becomes one of the most important features of this interactive model because no one will make personal decisions alone; instead all the decisions are made with the support of the faith community.

### Decision-making Fundamentals

No matter where one stands on his personal belief, three critical questions need to be answered before moving into a discernment process. First, it is the orientation of morality, "what is right or wrong?" This may sound like a basic question, but in this age so many people are confused with moral standards, even for basic moral questions. Since it is assumed that decision-making is operated through interactions between humans and the divine, when one's life orientation moves away from God, it hinders his relationship with God. Therefore, any effort of seeking guidance proves to be fruitless. It is absurd for a person who is living in sexual immorality to say, "God show me your will," since he is doing exactly the opposite of teachings revealed in the Bible.<sup>12</sup>

St. Francis de Sale also shows the importance of this orientation in seeking God's guidance, because anyone without commitment to God's commandments unavoidably struggles to connect with God, and it seems difficult to discern God's personal guidance in such circumstances:

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<sup>11</sup> Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, 201.

<sup>12</sup> John MacArthur, *Found: God's Will* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Press, 2012), Kindle Edition: Location 165.

Christian doctrine clearly proposes to us the truths God wills us to believe, the goods he wills us to hope for, the punishments he wills us to fear, the things he wills us to love, the commandments he wills us to fulfill, and the counsels he desires us to follow. All this is called the signified will of God, because he has signified and made manifest his will and intention that all these things should be believed, hoped for, feared, loved, and practiced.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in this paper it is assumed that theological principles built upon evangelical faith serve as fundamental moral guidelines of HCI community.

Second, it is the orientation of value, “what is the most important thing for me?” Many choices people have today may not fall into the category of right or wrong, but for the better or even for the best. In such a case, one’s priority determines what she is going to choose. So, it is important to consistently keep checking one’s values to see if they are in line with God’s intention for the whole life. If her heart or mind is aligned with that of Christ, she desires what God desires. It becomes much easier for such a person to be led by the Holy Spirit in making wise decisions. Just as John MacArthur says, “The Spirit-filled life yields every decision to the control of the Spirit.”<sup>14</sup> Watchman Nee, a Chinese pastor, also observes, “A spirit-controlled will inclines towards God’s will. It unites with God’s will, seeks after him, and is able to rise above one’s own emotion and reasoning. A submissive will pleases God immensely, for he can use it to hold sway over the whole man.”<sup>15</sup> This spiritual controlled (or filled) life begins with one’s submissive will and ends with values as fruits of lifetime orientation.

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<sup>13</sup> Francis de Sale, *Finding God’s Will for You* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1998), Kindle Edition: Location 113.

<sup>14</sup> MacArthur, *Found: God’s Will*, Location 165.

<sup>15</sup> Watchman Nee, *Spiritual Discernment* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc., 2014), Kindle Edition: Location 93.

Third, it is the orientation of faith, “what is the ultimate good of my life?” No one likes pain in this life. However, avoiding pains may do more harm than good for one’s spiritual wellbeing. If the end-purpose of decision-making is to pursue happiness, there is little room for God to work out his wonderful plan for the goodness of his people. In this paper, it is believed that, before entering a discerning process, one’s disposition of heart should rest upon trusting in God. Decisions guided by God may not be void of pains, but his guidance will bring the ultimate good to one’s being.

In summary, it is assumed that this faith community shares the same orientation of morality, values and faith, which become three fundamentals in approaching God for his guidance in decision-making. This framework disposes one’s heart to divine love so that a decision comes as the Spirit of God touches one’s heart. In the following chapters, this paper is going to gradually unfold basic understandings of discerning God’s guidance in a decision-making process. However, it is necessary to keep this in mind: the ways that God interacts with humans to deliver his guidance always remain a mystery.

### HCI Biblical Training Strategies

This project aims to bring people into a live relationship with Jesus. Therefore, it is not a seminar to attend, or a retreat to participate in. The goal of this HCI project is not limited in learning how to seek guidance for a particular case. Through participating in the project, people learn how to practice spiritual disciplines to sustain their relationship with God on a daily basis. Therefore, based on this on-going relationship, people make spiritual progress during their daily walk with God, and they become consciously aware of God’s presence in their lives. For this reason, this project is an integrated part of HCI’s

training program, which intends to improve members' spiritual wellbeing in development of a long-term strategy.

HCI is committed to biblical teachings of God's guidance on personal decisions. This project is a pilot study for potential future expansion of this spiritual exercise to a larger audience. It is believe that basic elements of this project are applicable to other Christian groups for seeking divine guidance as well. In addition, based on findings of the project, a further study may be suggested to investigate the congregational discernment of God's guidance in a faith community. The basic principles of this interactive model may also be applicable to a congregational discernment of God's guidance.



## CHAPTER 2

### FALLACIES IN DECISION-MAKING PRACTICES

Finding God's will in decision-making is still a popular topic in the twenty-first century. Many books have been written in last few decades. Therefore, contemporary Christians find no lack of advice on this subject since each school attempts to provide answers to this quest of discerning God's will. In spite of the popularity of this topic, it is necessary to clarify some of misunderstandings and ill practices in the beginning of this research, so that people may pursue the course of discernment in an appropriate way of relating to the Triune God. In this chapter, it is intended to rectify the HCI's position on divine guidance, remind of common errors or false beliefs among Evangelical Christians, and develop principal strategies for this project.

#### **Fallacies in Decision-making Practices**

Divine guidance is a message from God to help people make good decisions. It is also called finding God's will. Both terms are often used interchangeably in the literature. However, the nuance of the two terms tells a great deal about interactions between God and humans. Finding God's will may imply that God's will is passive, mechanic or static.

In this paper, seeking divine guidance is preferred because this term reflects interactive nature of this dynamic relationship between humans and the divine.

### Obstacles in Seeking God's Guidance

One of the major obstacles in seeking divine guidance is the focus of this seeking process. When people come to God for guidance, it is tempting to retrieve guidance from him instead of cultivating the relationship. In another word, people are inclined to take their attention on the answer rather than God himself. In reference to divine guidance, M. Blaine Smith states:

The subject of guidance should really begin with God – what is his role in the whole process? Unfortunately, many popular discussions on guidance leave us feeling as though guidance depends on our ability to figure out God's will. We fail to realize that guidance ultimately is God's problem. God himself takes the initiative in guiding the person who is open to being directed by him.<sup>1</sup>

For this reason, the journey of seeking divine guidance begins with knowing God and relating to him in an appropriate manner.

In order to overcome this obstacle, people must discipline themselves in spiritual exercises. God cannot be bribed, coerced or cheated for one's own benefit. Therefore, it will take time and effort until people are able to habitually come to God for a meaningful relationship. It is imperative for people to be on this journey with God, no matter how far they have gone, the grace of God is able to embrace their lives and lead them through God's guidance. For this reason, the initial step of a seeking process should take as much time as needed to remove anything blocking the relationship with God. When people

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<sup>1</sup> M. Blaine Smith, *Knowing God's Will: Finding Guidance for Personal Decisions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 55-56.

acquire the spiritual eyes of Jesus through disciplines, it is natural for them to receive divine guidance without any struggles or distractions.

The second major obstacle is the practice of divination, in which God is ignored as a person in the process of seeking guidance. People of all nations have studied for centuries how to dissect God's will, whether they are casting lots, watching the stars, looking for signs, talking with spirits, and telling fortunes. Unfortunately, these pagan practices became popular among Christians because fewer Christians today walk with God in a close relationship. For example, some believers seek guidance by randomly putting their fingers in the Bible and expect that God reveal his messages through a verse. Certainly, God still speaks to his people through his Word in this age; however, this is not the way that Scripture should be used in seeking guidance.

A young lady has been in a dating relationship, but she is not sure if this man is the future spouse whom God intends for her. So, she prays that God gives her a sign: if this man calls her on a certain night, she will know that he is the one that God chooses for her. She prays for long hours on that day, waiting for him to call. Finally, she receives her boyfriend's phone call and feels relieved. However, their dating relationship does not last more than a few months. She becomes furious, blaming God for her misfortune. The fact is that all of this divination activity has done little more than confuse people. Meanwhile, a loving and patient God waits for his people to turn to him in obedience.<sup>2</sup>

The third major obstacle in seeking divine guidance is the disposition of the heart. More often than not, people come to seek divine guidance with a wish that God proves

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 8.

their own agenda. If this is the case, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to truly see what God leads in making decisions. For instance, there is one man who wishes his choice to be confirmed by God. So, standing at the crossroad, he throws a quarter to see if its face is up. The first time, he does not see what he desires, so he continues to try many times until he finally has the desired result, and then he concludes that God confirms his choice. This story tells how critical a person's heart is to the success of seeking divine guidance. No one comes to God with a pure heart unless he has labored diligently through prayers, repentance, and reflection. For this reason, this interactive model suggests that sufficient time and space be reserved to condition one's heart before receiving divine guidance.

### False Beliefs in Seeking God's Guidance

Seeking divine guidance is to live life with God, where receiving and discerning divine guidance naturally flows out of a dynamic relationship with him. However, this ideal does not guarantee an easy path to be in harmony with God's perfect will. Human fallen nature, the influence of this world, and the attacks of evil spirits are the three major channels that often lead people away from God's guided life. In this section, common misconceptions or errors on seeking divine guidance are discussed.

The first misconception is that all decisions can be found in the Bible. This view is seriously misguided and harmful. Dallas Willard indicates this view intends to honor the Bible, but it does so with a zeal that is not according to knowledge (Rom 10:2).<sup>3</sup> Many specific circumstances in human life are not dealt with in the Bible and need

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<sup>3</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 78.

spiritual discernment. Simply speaking, though principles of God's guidance and his guardianship are universal, the guided lives of believers are as different from one another as are the believers themselves.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is appropriate to acknowledge that God's guidance may come in different forms, and biblical revelations do not dictate all aspects of Christian livings in this life.

The second misconception is that there is a divine message every minute. This view believes that God is either telling a person what to do at every turn of the road, or he is at least willing to and available to tell if this person would only ask him.<sup>5</sup> The all-too-natural assumption is that it refers to a blueprint for one's life, which must be discovered. Christians have long cherished the notion that God reveals the future or gives a mandate for the future when he shows his will.<sup>6</sup>

Another form of this view is that God unveils his plan all at once. However, there is no example that God does so to anyone in history. Simply, because God has a plan, does not mean that he necessarily has any intention of sharing it with a person.<sup>7</sup> Instead, God usually unfolds his plan progressively and thus it is axiomatic that God leads as much by information he withholds as by information he gives.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, seeking divine guidance comes from a lifetime relationship with God.

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<sup>4</sup> J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, *God's Will: Finding Guidance in Everyday Decisions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 76.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Knowing God's Will*, 35-36.

<sup>7</sup> Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Knowing God's Will*, 60.

The third misconception is whatever comes is God's will. This mistaken view is commonly adopted to react against what happened in tragedies. God makes use of circumstances in his dealing with humans, but not everything that happens in this world reveals his will. Just like Willard comments, "God's world is an arena in which we have an indispensable role to play. The issue is not simply what God wants, but also what we want and will. When we receive whatever comes we are not receiving guidance."<sup>9</sup>

The fourth misconception is that God limits his guidance to certain people. For example, God only reveals his guidance to Christians. MacArthur claims, "First, if you want to know God's will, you must be saved. Second, you must be Spirit-filled. That is the teaching of the Word of God."<sup>10</sup> It is hard to imagine someone coming to God, asking guidance on marriage or a career, and God saying, "Sorry, I cannot give you guidance, because you are not Christian. Wait until six years later, after your baptism, and then I will guide you in decision-making." This seems absurd and contradicts with biblical revelations. God's grace blankets human life for believers or non-believers, the good or the wicked. If Jesus did not turn away from children and sinners (Mk.10:13-16), God will not turn away anyone who comes to him for guidance.

Another version of this view is that God only makes his will known to "special" Christians, such as well-known leaders, ministers, and missionaries or mature Christians. Spiritual maturity is crucial in seeking God's guidance, but this does not exclude certain believers seeking God because God's grace is sufficient for people to seek him, relate

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<sup>9</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 82.

<sup>10</sup> MacArthur, *Found: God's Will*, Location 122.

with him, and understand his guidance for a God-directed life. In another word, the justice of God assures that he does not have any partiality or prejudice against people who seek him with reverence and sincerity for a purpose of decision-making. The biblical picture of guidance is one of God's taking the person who has a basic desire for his will and working out a plan in that person's life which is realized to an important extent in spite of this person's weakness and sin.<sup>11</sup>

The fifth misconception, there are fears of missteps in receiving divine guidance. Many develop tremendous anxiety in seeking God's guidance. On one hand, they fear that they might not receive the guidance correctly. On the other hand, they anticipate misfortune should they perceive God's message wrong. Smith lists four of these fears in seeking divine guidance, and he assures that divine guidance for the consecrated believer is not merely a possibility, nor simply a good probability. It is a promise – one of the great promises of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> In short, Smith writes about the four fears: God may not give the information people need to decide within his will; people may not be able to understand God's will if he does not convey it; a past decision made in faith may later be discovered to be outside of God's will; and personal sins may ultimately cause one to miss God's plan for one's life.<sup>13</sup> It is important to keep God's promises in mind when seeking divine guidance: by God's grace Christians are promised to receive divine guidance; and through God's sovereignty they are also promised the protection from self-destruction.

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<sup>11</sup> Smith, *Knowing God's Will*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

The six misconception is about wrong perceptions about divine guidance. Some believe that God's guidance means happiness or success; some think that God's guidance unavoidably incurs misfortune; and others mistake God's guidance only given for critical decisions. Unfortunately, none of these ideas warrants the support of biblical text. It is important to remember that the goal of seeking guidance is to please God and live out the full potential of this life. In addition, the reality of God's guardianship and guidance, while glorious in themselves, brings no immunity from any of the pains and problems of everyday human life in a fallen world.<sup>14</sup> No matter what happens in this life, God always intends to bless his children. God's guidance covers every part of the Christian's life, whose purpose is to live a holy life to please God.

The seventh misconception is a belief that God's guidance always comes with a sign. This is particularly popular among Christians seeking vocational calls. If a person does not receive a sign from God, he is not confirmed with his calling to serve in the full-time ministry. Many seek a series of spectacular experiences with God, but biblically the dramatic seems to be the exception rather than the norm.<sup>15</sup>

Some quote Gideon's example as an example to support such a claim. However, in the book of Hebrews Gideon is praised for his courageous attacks on idols and the enemy of Israel, not his way of seeking guidance. In fact, this story demonstrates that God graciously responded to meet Gideon's need in spite of his weak faith. It is doubted that God intended for Gideon to serve as an example of seeking guidance for people to

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<sup>14</sup> Packer, *God's Will*, 43-44.

<sup>15</sup> Blackaby, *Hearing God's Voice*, 22-38.



follow. Such action is tantamount to testing God (Dt 6:16) and should have no place in the life of a believer.<sup>16</sup> If God gives signs, as he sometimes does, they are to be received as a bonus and an encouragement, but believers should be seeking guidance without any form of a quest for signs.<sup>17</sup>

Divine guidance is graciously made available to God's people as one of God's provisional graces. To receive divine guidance is to claim God's blessings, requiring the knowing of God and of self, practice, and patience. A biblical understanding of divine guidance is critical to Christian practices in decision-making. In addition, it is important to remain in God's grace and enjoy God's provision by living in a lovely relationship with God, the Creator and Redeemer.

### **Congregational Understanding of God's Guidance**

Unlike theologians, general church members have little knowledge of attributes or aspects of God's will. For them, there is no doubt that God is all-powerful and sovereign. If God wills something, he will be able to accomplish it. Unlike the attributes of God, God's will is not immutable. To be more accurate, church members realize that some part of God's will cannot be changed since it is clearly revealed in the Bible. In another word, not the whole counsel of God's will is immutable. Therefore, HCI members are devoted to prayer, anticipating that God changes things, such as healing the sick, manifesting his power, and turning around circumstances for their favors.

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<sup>16</sup> J. Carl Laney Jr., "Knowing the Will of God," in *Understanding Christian Theology*, eds. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003), 260-261.

<sup>17</sup> Packer, *God's Will*, 36.

In addition, church members realize that not all of God's will is made known to humans. God has revealed himself since the beginning of his creation, and he never ceases to do so. Therefore, it is important for Christians to know God's desires for humans so that they live up to these standards. However, some of his will is sealed and was never intended to be made available for humans until the appointed time (Rv10:4). For this reason, it is fruitless for believers to find God's hidden will. There is no doubt that God's will is perfect, but church members may feel intimidated when they are asked to live according to God's standard.

The first of the four spiritual laws says, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."<sup>18</sup> Congregational members who are familiar with this Gospel tract know this statement by heart, and they firmly believe that God has a personal will for each of his children. In term of the details of this plan, church members in general accept what is called the Blueprint Model, believing that God has a specific will for everyone. It is the view that is often taught from the pulpit or by media evangelists. Unfortunately, this model does not have enough emphasis on the responsibility of believers in their life-changing decisions.

Many register their frustration as they follow instructions of the Blueprint Model to find that specific plan. As a result, people either lose their interests in seeking guidance or they give up completely. It is not unusual that people come to seek divine guidance only when they have a critical decision to make. However, without the grand picture of an abundant life that God intends for each individual, one is tempted to make decisions

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Bright, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (Peachtree City, GA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 2006), 2.

based on short-term interests. Therefore, the proposed model in this paper emphasizes interactions between humans and the divine. People are encouraged to seek guidance in the context of the whole life directed by God.

Considering common errors discussed in the above sections and a congregational need at HCI, the following sections of this chapter deal primarily with several important features of this project to ensure the balance of biblical teachings on divine guidance and experiential practices in the process of discerning divine guidance. In the next section, HCI's position on divine guidance is elaborated. In addition, experiential aspects of this project are described so that principal strategies are outlined to encourage participants of the HCI project actively engaging spiritual disciplines.

### **HCI's Position on God's Guidance**

To seek divine guidance, two fundamental questions need to be asked: the first question is, "Does God have a plan for individuals?" If not, there is no point of seeking. And the second is, "Does God communicate his plan to us?" If not, there is no way of knowing. If people do not believe the existence of God's personal will and his intention to communicate this will, there is no point seeking divine guidance. This project is built upon the conviction that God not only has a specific will for individuals, but also he is willing to communicate that will to people, so that God's people can follow this guidance in their personal lives.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Douglas Huffman, ed., *How then Should we Choose? Three Views on God's Will and Decision-making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009), Kindle Edition: Location 262.

## God has a Plan for each of his Children

According to theologians, personal guidance is to bring two minds – the divine and human – into the same picture, “Ideally personal guidance brings the things into the desired outcome, but at the same time, allows the other person’s mind to be guided to its fullest capacity without coercing that person’s will.”<sup>20</sup> From this statement, it is clear that God is consistently working with people and guiding them on their life path. Therefore, HCI believes that God has a plan for each of his children, which becomes a fundamental principle in seeking divine guidance.

As children of God, they are promised in Scripture that God will bestow on them discernment of decision or direction that is needed to keep moving with him along the path of life.<sup>21</sup> However, this conviction is not shared among all theologians and Evangelical Christians, and the debate is crucial to the foundation of this new model. For this reason, this is an integrated part of biblical teachings designed for this project.

Garry Friesen opposes the mainstream thoughts of Evangelicals, denying the existence of God’s personal will: “My contention is that an individual will of God for every detail of a person’s life is not found in Scripture.”<sup>22</sup> He believes that the Bible is fully sufficient to provide all guidance needed for a believer to know and do God’s will. For the moral will of the Bible touches every aspect and moment of life. So, while the Bible may not directly address a specific decision such that there is genuine freedom of

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<sup>20</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 68.

<sup>21</sup> Packer, *God’s Will*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Garry Friesen, *Decision-making and the Will of God* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2009), 40.

choice, the goals, attitudes, actions, and perspective that bear upon this choice are governed by the moral will of God.<sup>23</sup>

HCI believes that the biblical evidence shows that the concept of God's personal will exists in the Bible and should be included as an important article in the doctrine of divine guidance. Many theologians view Friesen's argument with serious doubts. Smith supports the idea of the personal will of God. In his critique of Friesen's book, Smith observes, "Friesen's most significant argument is that Scripture never directly states that God has a personal will for his people, while he admits that the Bible never denies this either."<sup>24</sup> Smith argues that the biblical term "the will of God" (*thelēma*) is applied to all aspects of God's will, including the personal will of God. After reviewing Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts, he concludes, "It is abundantly clear that Paul's intent in teaching on spiritual gifts is not to reflect on hidden mysteries of God's sovereign will into which we have no business delving, but to present a significant aspect of God's will which we are to make every effort to understand."<sup>25</sup>

Willard does not engage with Friesen directly, but develops the idea of personal guidance and gives guidelines to determine when and how God speaks through various means. Willard notes that the Bible is not the only way of God's speaking. While it is the written Word of God, the word of God is not simply the Bible.<sup>26</sup> Willard believes, if a person adopts the general counsel of the Scripture as a framework, that person is able to

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<sup>23</sup> Friesen, *Decision-making and the Will of God*, 155.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *Knowing God's Will*, 223.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>26</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 185.

receive God’s specific guidance through the inner voice from the Holy Spirit. God speaks to his people in guiding their decision in this age.

HCI’s position is also supported by J.I. Packer who discusses the question, “Has God a plan for individuals,” and then affirms, “Indeed, He has.” After citing biblical examples, he concludes that God has a plan for his children. In addition, he demonstrates God’s ability to communicate his will through Scripture and the indwelling Spirit. Packer aptly addresses both questions asked earlier in this section, which become solid principles in seeking divine guidance: “It is impossible to doubt that guidance is a reality intended for, and promised to, every child of God.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, Christians should be seeking God’s guidance diligently and be attentive to divine initiatives in their lives.

#### God Communicates his Guidance

God is a communicating God, so throughout the Bible, God tirelessly reaches out to his people and brings salvation to mankind. If God has a personal will for each of his children, it is impossible to believe that he is reluctant to communicate that plan with them. As a matter of fact, throughout history, God has been continuously showing great interest in guiding his people for personal decisions.

Based on biblical revelations, HCI believes that there are two primary ways of divine communication in this age. First, God communicates through a voice that is recognized by humans or as words addressed to, or even through people.<sup>28</sup> The primary manner of this communication is the Word of God, because God continues to speak to his

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<sup>27</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 232-233.

<sup>28</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 69-70.

people through the Bible. The basic form of divine guidance is the presentation of positive ideals as guidelines for all human livings; therefore, it cannot be ignored in seeking divine guidance. Packer writes, “The regular shape of guidance is that God teaches us to apply revealed principles of action, both positive and negative; to observe parameters and limits of behavior that the Bible lays down; and thus, to follow the path of faithful obedience and true wisdom, in fellowship with the Lord our shepherd who by his Spirit leads us so to do.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, this form of communication remains as a common expression of divine guidance for today’s Christians.

The second way God’s intention and thoughts are communicated is to those who have been close to God and involved in his work. As believers move close to God, they intuitively know what is on the mind of God without having to be told. Willard notes that many cannot progress in their relationship with God because they solely focus on what they think that God might be telling them to do.<sup>30</sup> This type of communication is a result of an intimate relationship with God, and often neglected in seeking guidance.

HCI firmly believes that God speaks to his people and guides them to his perfect will. The problem of not hearing from God never lies with God, because God always communicates his will, and this is not a matter of searching in vain for God’s hidden will. God readily reveals it to those who show themselves obedient to do it.<sup>31</sup> God always takes the initiative, and he does not wait to see what people want to do for him. After God

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<sup>29</sup> Packer, *God’s Will*, 29-30.

<sup>30</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Hearing God’s Voice* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2002), 264.

has taken the initiative for guidance, he does wait until people respond to him by adjusting themselves to him and making themselves available to him.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the question is not whether God communicates his guidance to his people. Rather, God's people must make themselves ready for receiving divine guidance. Once the guidance is communicated, God expects people to embrace his guidance enthusiastically and strive to achieve what God intends in their lives.

There are various means in the Scripture that God communicates with humans. God reveals his will to accomplish his purposes in this world, and his goal is to draw his people into a loving relationship with himself. In the Scripture, it is found that God communicates to his people in many ways through: angels (Gen 16); visions (Gen 15); dreams (Mt 2); audible voices (1 Sm 3); a gentle whisper (1 Kgs 19); wonders and miracles (Ex 8); the Holy Spirit (Acts 16); another person (Acts 11 and 21); the Scripture (1 Tm 3); a faith community (Acts 13); circumstance (Acts 17); prayers (John 16).<sup>33</sup> Certainly, this is not a complete list, nor is it the checklist for seeking guidance. Unless God limits himself, he is completely free to take whatever is necessary to communicate with his people. Biblical scholars realize in their works the primacy of Scripture as the way of God's communication, but it is equally important to notice that Scripture is not the only way that God communicates with his people in this dispensation.

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<sup>32</sup> Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, 110.

<sup>33</sup> Blackaby, *Hearing God's Voice*, 22-38.



## Experiential Aspects of this Project

There is a Chinese saying, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” This is also true for one’s spiritual journey, which has a beginning but no end. Therefore, it is expected for participants that the experiential part of this project become the significant step in a personal relationship with God. Seeking divine guidance is not a one-time project, but a lifelong journey walking with Jesus, to know him and to follow him so that one’s mind and heart can be transformed completely into the likeness of Christ.

From the beginning of this project, participants are encouraged to pursue knowing God through different spiritual disciplines. These experiential practices intend to cultivate relationship with God in three steps. The initial experiential step is awareness, noticing that God is working consistently inside the person and around the world. The spiritual exercises of Ignatius and his daily *examen* intend to bring people to the presence of God’s grace in each day of their life. This awareness brings peace, joy and gratitude out of a suffering person to God, and in turn becomes a critical element to the development of a personal relationship with God.

The second experiential step is understanding, discerning the source of thoughts and feelings. It is believed that the human heart is the battleground where God and the evil one struggle for mastery.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, God is not the only source of pious thoughts. Discernment becomes the fundamental tool in knowing what God intends for and which direction he is leading in this life. It is imperative to discern how God wants people to

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<sup>34</sup> William A. Barry, “Discernment of Spirits as an Act of Faith,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. George W. Traub (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 166.

live their lives in this world in tune with God's Spirit, the one divine action at work in this universe.<sup>35</sup> Discernment presupposes a willingness to look at and appreciate the signs of God's love for humans and in response to listen to the voice of the Spirit of God and follow where the Spirit leads.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, this project encourages participants to practice discernment during six teaching sessions and the retreat time, which helps them master the skills of noticing and discerning movements of their mind and thoughts consistently.

The third experiential step in exercising spiritual disciplines is action, taking concrete steps to conform one's thoughts into the likeness of Christ. Discernment does nothing without changing one's heart. Discernment means an act of faith that God is inspiring a person to follow Jesus. Therefore, insights must be followed by action for discernment to be complete, and that action is an act of faith in God's direction for this person.<sup>37</sup> It is believed that, with the aid of the Holy Spirit and powered by God's love, each person is capable of aligning one's heart with that of Christ's. For this reason, this project is designed to train participants to acquire these experiences in the three steps.

Another experiential feature of the project is that each person makes one's own choice in the setting of a faith community. This idea is developed based on practices of Quaker's clearness committee, in which a group of people is appointed to help a member find clarity in a decision. In another word, community plays a role in personal decisions.

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<sup>35</sup> Barry, "Discernment of Spirits as an Act of Faith," 169.

<sup>36</sup> David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 90.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

According to Quaker literature, this practice of forming the clearness committee is rooted in a crucial conviction:

Each of God’s children has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power needed to deal with the problem. But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out.<sup>38</sup>

This observation agrees with many Evangelical scholars about the role of community in spiritual transformation. Keith Matthews discusses the importance of a faith community in spiritual transformation, and concludes, “Authentic community, then, is the primary transforming vehicle in which Jesus himself is revealed and glorified in the world today – not just in our words, but primarily in our actions.”<sup>39</sup>

Based on the same conviction, this project designs a small group for a discerning person to have the necessary listening and emotional support. HCI agrees that obedient listening and co-listening to the Spirit speaking in personal experience, in the church and in the Scripture, as well as in doctrine and in the community, are recognized as to-be-trusted sources not only for Christian discernment, but the entire process of Christian spiritual guidance and direction as well.<sup>40</sup> This observation is critical to discern well in a seeking process, especially for those who are new to Christian faith, or with little biblical knowledge, or fewer years of solid relationship with God.

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<sup>38</sup> Parker J. Palmer, “The Clearness Committee: A Communal Approach to Discernment,” *Center for Courage & Renewal*, accessed August 10, 2018, <http://www.couragerenewal.org/clearnesscommittee>.

<sup>39</sup> Keith J. Matthews, “The Transformational Process,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 95.

<sup>40</sup> Carolyn Gratton, *The Art of Spiritual Guidance* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 186.

According to *Guidelines of the Clearness Committee*, the committee consists of three-to-five members and usually meets one-to-three times to assist the focusing person decide whether she is ready for the next step of action. The whole process includes four steps of: Worship together; Deep listening to the questions and concerns brought to the committee; Careful, gentle open-ended questions from all clearness committee members; Reflecting back what has been heard.<sup>41</sup> The committee meetings are supposed to be carried out in a spirit of worship, listening and loving concern. There is no place of judgmental evaluation or cross-examination by any member of the Clearness Committee in the entire process. These practices are to be incorporated into the process of seeking guidance in the interactive decision-making model.

The Clearness Committee has been proved to be an effective approach to discern God's guidance in the Quaker tradition. The idea of discerning God's guidance in a faith community is a critical component developed in this new model; but the procedures are adapted into a small-group setting to guide the participants of the HCI project for a decision-making process.

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<sup>41</sup> Friends General Conference, "Some Guidelines for the Clearness," *Friends General Conference*, accessed August 10, 2018, [https://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Guidelines %20for%20Clearness %20for%20a%20Leading%20or%20Ministry.pdf](https://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Guidelines%20for%20Clearness%20for%20a%20Leading%20or%20Ministry.pdf).

PART TWO  
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 3

### REVIEW OF THREE DECISION-MAKING MODELS

In recent decades, the debate on discerning the personal will of God became so popular that thousands of pages have been written on this subject. For this study, only a small fraction of these publications have been selected to represent three schools on their perspectives of discerning God's guidance. Before the presentation of three models on decision-making, it is beneficial to have a brief historical survey on seeking guidance in church history.

#### **A Brief Historical Survey**

Christian discernment can be tracked all of the way back to the writings of the early Church, but the fantasy of searching for guidance appears to be a modern phenomenon. Compared to the modern level of Christian concern, it appears that relatively little was written on the idea of discovering God's specific plan for one's life prior to the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> However, divine guidance has been put in a large context of discernment, and for ancient Christians, discernment was essential for everything they

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<sup>1</sup> Huffman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 139.

did in daily life and in their spiritual practices. For this reason, ancient roots have much to do with Christian discernment of God's guidance in the twenty-first century.

Origen of Alexandria (185-254), the great theologian of the third century, was the first Christian writer to reflect more systematically on the theme of discernment, and his view has greatly influenced later spiritual writers. For him, discernment is viewed as an operation of the higher part of the soul, whereby the soul opens itself to its spirit. As such it is able to accept divine guidance from the Holy Spirit and the *Logos*.<sup>2</sup> In this process of discernment, Christians are guided to exercise their ability to make progress in a spiritual life. It is reasoned that people discern well only when they are able to cultivate a human freedom from preoccupations and prejudices that unconsciously govern their attitudes and responses.<sup>3</sup>

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the most influential theologian and churchman of his generation, addresses discernment extensively in his works. For him to discern, it is necessary to know oneself, and particularly to know what one is experiencing.<sup>4</sup> Thus, he puts a remarkable emphasis on both heart and mind. It is no surprise to see the centrality of union with Christ in Benedictine spirituality, since this is the foundation to discern well in Christian traditions.

John Wesley (1703-1791), a famous figure in the eighteenth century, was deeply committed to the integration of heart and mind in spiritual life, and his primary focus on

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<sup>2</sup> P. B. Decock, "Discernment of Origen of Alexandria," *Acta Theologica* 33:17 (November 2013): 189-208.

<sup>3</sup> Huffiman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 2154.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 2189.

the witness of the Spirit shed light on the discerning of the spirits in seeking guidance. In addition, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral – Scripture, Tradition, Experience, and Reason – play an important role in the formation of his teaching on divine guidance. It is in the balance of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, one is assured to know the mind of God.

It is believed that George Muller (1805-1898) in England is the first one among Evangelicals to draw up a step-by-step approach to ascertain the will of God:

I seek at the beginning to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people generally is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's will, whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what his will is.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, this practice of decision-making has greatly influenced many people in the twentieth century. In the following sections, three major views on divine guidance in the literature are evaluated.

### **The Blueprint Model – The Blackabys**

This view, which was popular among Evangelicals, assumes that God has an ideal plan for each decision, and he will make his guidance known to those attentive believers. In determining God's guidance, the focus is on external signs and spiritual counsel that help the individual determine God's perfect plan. Therefore, this view is named The Blueprint Model,<sup>6</sup> for this school believes that there is only one perfect plan for each individual. Henry and Richard Blackaby are fervent advocates for this model, and their

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<sup>5</sup> George Muller, *Answer to Prayer from George Muller's Narratives* (Chicago: The Moody Press, 2012), Kindle Edition: Location 13-24.

<sup>6</sup> Gordon Smith, *Listening to God in Times of Choices* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 15-16.



best-selling book *Experiencing God*, represents this approach that is well-received among Evangelical churches in the US and Canada. In this book, the authors elaborate seven realities intended to help people experiencing God: God is always at work around his people; God pursues a continuing loving relationship with his people that is real and personal; God invites his people to become involved with him in his work; God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the Church to reveal himself, his purposes, and his ways; God's invitation for his people to work with him always leads into a crisis of belief that requires faith and action; God's people must make major adjustments in their life to join God in what he is doing; God's people come to know God by experience as they obey him, and he accomplishes his work through them.<sup>7</sup> Working through the life of biblical characters, the authors demonstrate that it is possible for modern Christians to experience God in the same way as Moses did. It is this vision that captured the hearts of many people who desired to walk with God.

The authors understand the longing of contemporary Christians for an intimate relationship with God. To meet this need, they present seven principles based on solid exegesis of Scripture to help cultivate this relationship. Therefore, the biblical foundation of this book is applicable to any project that intends to seek God's guidance in a decision-making process. For these authors, it is appropriate to suggest that the dynamic of God's relationship with people described in the Scriptures provides insights into how God may relate to Christians today.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Blackabys, *Experiencing God*, 51-64.

<sup>8</sup> Huffman, *How then should we Choose?* Location 1037.

In this book, the authors assure modern Christians, “God still speaks to us today, through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church,”<sup>9</sup> which become cornerstones of their ways to seek God’s guidance. Although four avenues of God’s communication they propose seem limited to be attentive to God’s voice, their assurance provides a profound impact on those who desire to seek divine guidance. Furthermore, according to biblical claims on God’s characters, they perceive how God relates to his people and how God fulfills his purpose in a perfect plan.

In 1984, Garry Friesen initiated a debate by publishing his book *Decision-making and the Will of God*, in which he did a masterful job of critiquing the Blueprint Model, which proposes belief that God always has one particular will for a given decision, and any deviation from that will may miss the perfect plan that God intends for one’s life.<sup>10</sup> However, the major issue of this model lies with their confidence in finding God’s perfect plan in each of people’s decisions. Friesen points out, according to this model, the definition of God’s will becomes particularly problematic: “This view uses the biblical term – God’s will, but not in its normal theological senses. Theologians recognize that the term can be used of God’s moral will or his sovereign will. The Blackabys add a third use of the term will of God.”<sup>11</sup> (see Figure 5 in Appendix A). Therefore, this third aspect – God’s personal will – has become a focal point of this debate.

God surely can carry out his personal will if he is determined to do so, such as the way he dealt with Jonah. Two questions emerge out of this argument: out of his abundant

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<sup>9</sup> Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, 133-154.

<sup>10</sup> Friesen, *Decision-making and the Will of God*, 27-30.

<sup>11</sup> Huffman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 930.

grace, will God prefer to work with his people interactively for making decisions, or will God allow his people to make decisions on their own? Obviously, this does not have to be one way or another as God deals with each person differently. Even for the same person God may communicate in many ways. It is dangerous to generalize one scenario for all circumstances. For this reason, it is believed that the Blueprint Model may not be applicable to every situation in this life. Though this model provides valuable insights into seeking God's guidance, it is difficult to reconcile such a micro-managing God with biblical teachings.

### **The Wisdom Model – Garry Friesen**

Garry Friesen has done an incredible job in his book to demolish the claim of the Blueprint Model, that is, “For each of our decisions, God has an ideal plan that he will make known to attentive believers.” Working through biblical examples, he concludes that an individual will of God for every detail of a person's life is not found in Scripture.

We have seen that the examples of detailed divine guidance in Scripture are infrequent, limited in scope, and directed to persons who play a special role in God's program for earth, . . . My response to the question, “Does God have a plan for my life?” is this: If God's plan is thought of as a blueprint or a dot in the “center of God's will” that I must discover, the answer is no.<sup>12</sup>

According to Friesen, there are only two kinds of God's will revealed in Scripture, God's sovereign will is his secret plan that determines everything that happens in the universe, and God's moral will consists of revealed commands in the Bible that teach how people ought to believe and live (see Figure 3 in Appendix A).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Friesen, *Decision-making and the Will of God*, 46, 76.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

Therefore, for Friesen, decision-making is not a matter of finding God's will; rather it is to seek divine guidance according to the moral will of God and to do what is pleasing to him. Based on this assumption, Friesen denies that God has a personal will for each individual and thus there is no need to seek such guidance. Instead he proposes the so-called Wisdom Model based on following four principles, which become foundation in his approach to make wise decisions: Where God commands, people must obey; where there is no command, God gives people freedom (and responsibility) to choose; where there is no command, God gives people wisdom to choose; when people have chosen what is moral and wise, they must trust the sovereign God to work all the details together for good.<sup>14</sup> This wisdom approach to decision-making has received wide acclaim as an alternative to the Blueprint Model.

Although Friesen's critique of the Blueprint Model in his book is convincing and biblical, his proposed model shows obvious weaknesses as well. There is no doubt in this wisdom approach that he acknowledges the role of the Holy Spirit and the importance of an intimate relationship with God in a decision-making process. However, he sees special revelation as unnecessary in such a process. In addition, there is no place for listening to God's voice in seeking divine guidance: does God still speak to guide Christians in their decision-making; does God show any interests in personal guidance?

Smith critiques that the wisdom perspective seems all about testing and weighing and considering, but there is not reflected here a radical openness to the Holy Spirit, an eagerness to know Christ intimately, and to respond with joy to the inner witness of the

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<sup>14</sup> Friesen, *Decision-making and the Will of God*, 14-15.

Spirit.<sup>15</sup> In decision-making, the dynamic relationship with God is the center of every decision to make. It is beneficial to make use of the Scriptures in this model, but without clear understanding of the leading of the Holy Spirit, any arbitrary interpretation of biblical verses could become misleading in seeking guidance.

Furthermore, by denying the existence of God's personal will, Friesen seemingly goes for another extreme, that is, God never shows his divine intention to guide people's life. This is the same dilemma of the Blueprint Model: theology must allow God to be God. It must be asked, does God have freedom to grant a person clear guidance while he allows another weigh one's choices based on wisdom revealed in Scriptures? In reality, the answer may not be either/or, it could be both/and. For this reason, it is wise to notice the difference between the two scenarios and make wise choices accordingly.

### **Between the Two Models – M. Blaine Smith**

Among numerous publications on decision-making theories, not every scholar sides with either of the two models. Some agrees with Friesen's critique on the blueprint approach, but they may not accept his complete dismissal on existence of God's personal will. In this section, works from two respected scholars, M. Blaine Smith and J. I. Packer, are discussed and their approaches to seeking divine guidance are evaluated. Both authors represent a synthesis of the two models.

Smith, who published his book one year before Friesen's, also sensed misleading in the blueprint approach. However, unlike Friesen, he does not think that this problem

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<sup>15</sup> Huffman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 1934.

resulted from the idea of God's having an individual will itself rather from approaches Christians took to discerning it.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Smith sees no contradiction in God having an ideal choice among several other alternatives; meanwhile, God grants freedom for his people to choose from any of these choices.

In searching for divine guidance, Smith finds another pattern in the Scriptures that shows no signs or miracles needed for decision-making, which contradicts with claims in the Blueprint Model. He believes that this step-by-step approach revealed in the Scripture is normative in seeking divine guidance in people's daily life. He writes:

Consistently Scripture shows that God guides his people not through elaborate revelation of the future but only step by step. His guidance comes incrementally, one insight at a time. On the positive side, God does give us all the information we need to know his will for a decision. He provides all the insight needed to take the next step in front of us. But no more than that.<sup>17</sup>

For this reason, it is permitted to move ahead or even take a major step without receiving any sign or supernatural confirmation from God, and this is especially true for those who seek vocational guidance. In another word, Smith acknowledges the existence of God's personal will, but he does not believe this will as prescribed by the Blueprint Model, that is, God has a specific plan for every decision that Christians have to choose.

In addition, Smith proposes four providential factors in seeking guidance: desires, abilities, circumstances, and counsel. It is unusual among Evangelical scholars to encourage Christians to examine the deepest desires in seeking divine guidance, since Evangelicals often regard personal desires with suspicion and warn against being unduly

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, *Knowing God's Will*, 229.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

influenced by them as one seeks to know God's individual will.<sup>18</sup> While showing his distance from the blueprint perspective, Smith takes a similar stance with the wisdom approach by suggesting, "We should very frequently be thinking about teachings of Scripture and considering their relevance to the situations in which we find ourselves."<sup>19</sup>

Smith offers many insights in his book for divine guidance. However, he fails to provide any practical principles for real life decisions. For instance, the four factors are so loosely connected that it seems difficult to organize these thoughts into one harmonized decision. Although he offers some guidelines on discerning desires, more needs to be said on this subject for believers to make good use of it in practice.

In addition, Smith discusses the importance of an intimate relationship with God in decision-making, but his insights cannot be organically integrated into methods that he suggests. Therefore, Smith shares the same weakness of the Wisdom Model. In general, Smith does a better job at theological reflection on this subject than providing practical methods for believers to seek divine guidance. He notices the pattern of step-by-step in decision-making; however, God is not limited in one-way guiding people for decisions. It is certain that this is not the only way seeking divine guidance.

### **Between the Two Models – J. I. Packer**

J. I. Packer, a well-respected Christian scholar, has written on this subject for decades. His latest contribution was published in 2008, *God's Will: Finding Guidance for Everyday Decisions*, in which he argues that seeking divine guidance is to apply biblical

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<sup>18</sup> Friesen, *Decision-making and the Will of God*, 452.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, *Knowing God's Will*, 109.

principles into people's real-life situations. He writes, "The regular shape of guidance is that God teaches us to apply revealed principles of action, both positive and negative; to observe parameters and limits of behavior that the Bible lays down; and thus, to follow the path of faithful obedience and true wisdom, in fellowship with the Lord our shepherd who by his Spirit leads us so to do."<sup>20</sup> Though this may sound like the wisdom view, he does not side with either of the two camps. As a matter of fact, he intends not to engage with the debate. Packer believes that God not only has a plan for each of his children, but also has no difficulty in making his will known to his people.<sup>21</sup>

In general, he does not rule out the possibility that God may still communicate to his people today with wonders and signs. In his opinion, the immediate guidance with voice-like thought is the clearest and best and as an experience that all zealous believers might hope to know sooner or later.<sup>22</sup> For this reason, Packer holds a more balanced view in term of his position on divine guidance:

God on occasion in Bible times communicated with some people in the manner described above, and that he has not said he will never do so again, and that some at least of the glowing stories about guidance of this kind that are told can hardly be doubted. Some see reason to deny that God ever did, or will, communicate this way now that the canon of Scripture is complete, but that view seems to us to go beyond what is written and to fly in the face of credible testimony. It is not for us to place restrictions on God that he has not placed on himself!<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, he does bring up some misperceptions about divine guidance suggested by the Blueprint Model. First of all, he indicates that it seems unnecessary to have special

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<sup>20</sup> Packer, *God's Will*, 29-30.

<sup>21</sup> Packer, *Knowing God*, 231-232.

<sup>22</sup> Packer, *God's Will*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



signs from God in order to be confident of God's guidance. Second, Evangelicals take a so-called regular "quiet time" as a way to seek God's leading, but it should not be seen as a magic formula for receiving personal guidance from God. Third, he criticizes "laying a fleece" to discern God's guidance as a mistake. This can lead to not realizing the gifts of God bestowed to his children through the Spirit, since they are too lazy to do their jobs. Lastly, he observes that the basic mistake is to think of guidance as essentially inward prompting by the Holy Spirit apart from the written Word.<sup>24</sup>

Packer places much emphasis on a personal relationship with God in a decision-making process, and he begins his book with exposition on Psalm 23, concluding the way of knowing divine wisdom through an intimate relationship with God. Then he continues to develop this theme throughout the book, which makes his approach distinct from those proponents in the wisdom school, who usually neglect this centerpiece in a decision-making process. Packer puts the Scriptures as the foundation of divine guidance, not as lifeless rules but in the context of covenantal grace and the sovereignty of God. Overall, Packer does a good job avoiding pitfalls of both models in his presentations.

In summary, Packer does well in his research to layout theological foundations of divine guidance and keeps a good balance when he discusses critical issues. But he does not offer any practical measurements to guide believers in discerning God's guidance, except his warning of some pitfalls commonly seen in real life decisions. It is important to know biblical teachings on decision-making; however, it is equally important to apply theological principles into Christian practices of seeking guidance.

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<sup>24</sup> Packer, *Knowing God*, 234.

### **The Relationship Model – Gordon Smith**

The debate between the two schools is difficult and sometimes confusing as seen by Christians seeking guidance for decision-making. This third school of thought does not engage the debate regarding God’s personal will, nor does it offer any simple formula for decision-making. Gordon Smith reminds people of the center of seeking divine guidance – it is none other than God himself. Perhaps believers should be investing in their relationships with God and not in mere formulas for discovery or principles for wisdom.<sup>25</sup> This school acknowledges the existence of God’s personal will, but it does not view it apart from the grand picture of God’s intention for this universe as well as for a person’s life (see Figure 4 in Appendix A).

Smith expresses his concerns about the other two models since they basically leave God out of a decision-making process. The Blueprint Model looks for signs and examines circumstances, while the Wisdom Model essentially trusts in one’s capability to make choices. Smith writes, “But somewhere in all of this we must ask about God, there is a whole stream of Christian thoughts and that has consistently affirmed that in times of choices we can and must listen to God.”<sup>26</sup>

This statement echoes with Willard’s conviction of a conversational relationship with God, “God has created us for an intimate relationship with himself, both now and forever.”<sup>27</sup> A relationship with the timeless Jesus would gradually transform a person’s

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<sup>25</sup> Huffman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 211.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Listening to God in Times of Choices*, 16-17.

<sup>27</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 12.

life, enacting a complete rapprochement between human will and the will of God.<sup>28</sup> For this reason, discernment for God's guidance is about listening attentively, so Christians can discover which of the possible paths for their lives are in keeping with God's ways, which decisions bring believers into more harmonious alignment with the Divine.<sup>29</sup> In this approach, listening to God's voice is the key to know God's mind.

Therefore, this school of thought represents a third view on decision-making in the current discussion, which is called the Relationship Model, because of its emphasis on an intimate and living relationship with God. Decision-making is not supposed to be one-way communication, that is, to decipher divine mystery for human benefit alone, rather it is an interactive relationship between God and his people so that believers may live in a harmony with their Creator.

Smith believes, while God does not have a specific guidance for every decision, he provides guidance for isolated and life-shaping decisions. Through this intimate relationship, God speaks into the specifics of people's life, even into particularity:

There are obviously general principles that necessarily govern the lives of Christians, . . . However, the way in which the laws of God and the rules of the sermon are lived out is never generic. Each Christian must discern how these general principles apply and hold sway in his or her particular situation. Moreover, God's guidance in our lives is always specific and particular.<sup>30</sup>

It is commendable that Smith integrates practices of discernment from ancient Christian traditions into this dialogue and makes this third school not simply an alternative; rather

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<sup>28</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), Kindle Edition: location 188.

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Bieber, *Decision Making and Spiritual Discernment: The Sacred Art of Finding your Way* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2012), Kindle Edition: location 1161.

<sup>30</sup> Huffman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 2023.

he shifts the discussion to the core of this issue – the relationship with God matters a great deal in seeking divine guidance.

This model offers both theological insights as well as practical methods to help Christians for decision-making. But it seems impossible to build an intimate relationship in days or even in months. It is unimaginable to prohibit people from approaching God until they reach a certain level of relationship. By doing so it may be assumed that God does not communicate his guidance until people reach a certain degree of spiritual maturity. Therefore, this model is limited in its application to mature Christians only, and keeps others out of the reach with God.

### **Agreements among the Three Models**

These five authors, representing a wide spectrum of Christian's views on divine guidance, present solid arguments for their understanding of divine guidance, and each of them is biblically sound. However, these arguments do not make decision-making easier for ordinary Christians. On one hand, the five scholars disagree sharply on key issues in seeking divine guidance. On the other hand, they have several points of agreement with one another, which are proved to be significant for discussions in the following chapters. Therefore, it is constructive to review these agreements in this section to broaden basic understandings of this debate of seeking God's guidance.

There are at least four points of agreement among the three schools of thoughts. First, they all agree that Scripture is the primary source of seeking guidance. Friesen has shown that biblical teachings are the basic framework of the Wisdom Model, in which the Bible provides all of the wisdom Christians need to make wise decisions. For the

Relationship Model, Smith affirms that Scripture is foundational in discernment, which enables believers to fully appreciate the will of God.<sup>31</sup> The Blackabys in the Blueprint Model acknowledge supremacy of the Bible: “Scripture alone is authoritative for the Christian life, but these (church tradition and personal experience) cannot supersede and invalidate its instructions.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Scripture becomes indispensable in discerning God’s guidance no matter which approach is chosen to pursue divine wisdom.

Second, they all agree that the Holy Spirit plays a critical role in guiding believers for decision-making. The Blackabys and Smith agree that God speaks to people through the indwelling Spirit, the inner voice or the still, small voice. Though Friesen does not think that God’s spirit leads in personal guidance, he believes that obedience to God’s will is realized through the empowering of the Holy Spirit in Christians’ lives. For this reason, all believe that the Holy Spirit plays a critical role in believers’ seeking process.

Third, they all agree that a relationship with God is essential in seeking divine guidance. The Blackabys claim God pursues a love relationship with Christians as one of his basic principles in experiencing him. Friesen also sees a personal relationship with God underlining his wisdom approach. This loving relationship becomes fundamental in seeking guidance according to the Relationship Model: “The most helpful place to begin is with the principle of friendship with God. We have the potential for a unique, personal and dynamic relationship with God; and it is from this relationship – not as servants, but as friends – that we can encounter and respond to God and his will.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Listening to God in Times of Choices*, 47-48.

<sup>32</sup> Huffman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 332.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Listening to God’s Voice in Times of Choice*, 19.

Fourth, they all agree that decision-making is an important discipline in the life of Christians, and they all agree that God promises to guide his children for the goodness of their well-being. However, they disagree how believers ascertain that guidance. Smith sees that it is only possible through intimate relationship with God. The Blackabys do not deny the importance of this relationship, but believe that God communicates his guidance primarily through Scripture. Friesen also sees the centrality of the Bible in seeking divine guidance, but does not believe God's guidance in every personal decision. He claims that God's guidance comes through wisdom already revealed in Scripture. The question is whether these thoughts from the three schools can be correlated for a comprehensive understanding of divine guidance. It is the objective of this paper to find the harmony among these insights and propose a new model adaptable to a wider range of audience in seeking God's guidance.

In summary, by reviewing these agreements among three schools of thought in decision-making, it is interesting to realize that these authors become complimentary to one another in their expressions of divine guidance. In addition, it is possible that areas of disagreements manifest different theological reflections on this subject. For this reason, the Interactive Model proposed in this paper intends to take insights from three models of decision-making and integrate them with other Christian thoughts into a comprehensive understanding of divine guidance.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONTRIBUTIONS OF THREE CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITIES

In this chapter, three Christian spiritualities including the spirituality of desert dwellers, Ignatian Spirituality and the thoughts of Dallas Willard are introduced. Their contributions to divine guidance are evaluated. In addition, these insights are integrated in order to develop an interactive model of decision-making in following chapters.

#### **Desert Spirituality and Divine Guidance**

In the fourth and fifth centuries in Egypt, many fled to the desert, not for pursuing a better life, but for finding God in their lives. The essence of desert spirituality is that it was not taught but caught; it was a whole way of life.<sup>1</sup> For desert dwellers, discernment is the center of their spiritual lives and cannot be separated from their way of livings.

#### A Desert Perspective

Discernment, a Greek word “*diakrisiz*” (*diakrisis*) and its verb, occurs twenty-four times in the Septuagint. It is frequently used for judging a case involving two parties,

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<sup>1</sup> Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Trappist, KY: Cistercians Publications, 1975), xxi.

denoting the idea of judging, governing or discriminating. In the New Testament, both noun and verb appear twenty-two times, conveying the similar notion of deciding, differentiating or discerning. According to Antony Rich's study of this word, the meaning of *diakrisis* is expanded in the New Testament to express the spiritual faculty that enables believers to develop their spiritual life. He writes:

The *diakrisis* word group is used in the Scripture to express choices between alternatives, and to separate out and weigh up moral, natural, spiritual, and psychological aspects of life and arrive a value judgement concerning them. It is used to evaluate a person's inner or outer life, judicial decision, natural or spiritual phenomenon, and words spoken or heard.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, discernment in the biblical sense is the ability to discern matters to acquire a great understanding of them, the ability to distinguish between good and evil, and the capacity of knowing the will of God in this life.

In fourth century Egypt, this term of discernment could be described as a solid understanding of God's will, mother of all virtues, as well as a guide and regulator.<sup>3</sup> For desert dwellers, discernment can only be carried out in the community that they lived, and it is the virtue that distinguishes between good and bad, or more often between good and the mere appearance of good, and submitting oneself humbly to the judgment and insights of others ordinarily practiced it.<sup>4</sup>

For desert dwellers, according to their understanding of Scripture, discernment is both a gift from God and a spiritual discipline. In 1 Corinthians 12:10, the concept of

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<sup>2</sup> Antony D. Rich, *Discernment in the Desert Fathers: Diakrisis in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2007), 6-12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii. (an excerpt of Forward from Benedicta Ward).

<sup>4</sup> John Cassian, *The Conferences* (Mawah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 18.



discernment conveys the idea as one of spiritual gifts. In Hebrews 5:14, it represents an exercise of spiritual maturity. The words of St. Antony the Great, an Egyptian monk in the fourth century, states clearly about two characteristics of discernment: “A man has need of much prayer and self-discipline that he may receive from the Spirit the gift of discerning spirits and be able to know their characteristics – which of them are less evil, which more; what is the nature of the special pursuit of each of them, and how each of them is overcome and cast out.”<sup>5</sup>

The first monk who wrote about discernment in the West is John Cassian (360-435). In his work *The Conferences*, he assures the necessity of acquiring discretion (or discernment) as one of virtues, being first in importance and supreme over all.<sup>6</sup> Cassian recognizes discretion becomes most valuable and essential in spiritual life. From his point of view, discernment is a quality to be developed and employed in all aspects of life, rather than a rarely used charism restricted only to the mystic search of God.<sup>7</sup> So, ancient wisdom shows that it is impossible to seek divine guidance without meeting God.

#### St. John Climacus

St. John Climacus, a seventh century monk in the monastery on Mount Sinai, is well known for his work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. On the twenty-sixth step, “Discernment of Thought, Passions and Virtues,” he makes 189 entries on the subject,

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph T. Lienhard, “On Discernment of Spirits' in the Early Church," *Theological Studies* 41:3 (September 1980): 505-529.

<sup>6</sup> Cassian, *The Conferences*, 83-104.

<sup>7</sup> Richard F. Goodrich, "Book Review on 'Discernment in the Desert Fathers: *Diakrisis* in the Life and Thought of Early Egyptian Monasticism,'" *Implicit Religion* 12:1 (2009): 109-110.

which is one of the longest in his book. There is no doubt that this step is so critical in the monk's journey to spiritual perfection. At the beginning of this step, he defines the term *diakrisis* as a solid understanding of God's will, in all times, in all places, in all things; and it is found only among those pure in heart, in body, and in speech.<sup>8</sup> In addition, he clearly describes the three progressive stages in discernment: "Among beginners, discernment is real self-knowledge; among those midway along the road to perfection, it is a spiritual capacity to distinguish unfailingly between what is truly good and what in nature is opposed to the good; among the perfect, it is a knowledge resulting from divine illumination, which with its lamp can light up what is dark in others."<sup>9</sup>

From the above statement, three stages of discernment can be deduced. The first stage, called "self-knowledge," is the basic level of discernment, which acquires spiritual knowledge of self to discern the level of maturity and to know how much one can do with spiritual disciplines to make progress. The second is the stage of "discerning good and bad," trying to acquire the eyes of God to see things in a person's soul, since human perception is limited to what one can see, people do not see where a person's actions or decisions may lead but God foresees all.<sup>10</sup> The third stage is the ability of perceiving God's will for others. According to Climacus, the highest degree of discernment, called the expert discernment, is by no means an easy thing to recognize or comprehend. Those

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<sup>8</sup> John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, translated by Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 229.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>10</sup> Vassilios Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven* (Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2013), 200.

who possess expert discernment can, through divine illumination, see into hearts and minds of other people, and so their actions and decisions, being based on knowledge no one possess. Moreover, such a person who possesses expert discernment can perceive the will of God in every case, but sometimes may seem very strange to others.<sup>11</sup>

#### Guidelines from The *Philokalia*

According to orthodoxy tradition, *diakrisis*, or discernment called the queen of all virtues by Sophronios of Jerusalem, is one of charisms of the Holy Spirit and abides with the Church. Desert dwellers were well aware of human tendencies to deceive themselves and follow their own desires instead of God's will. So, discernment needs to be based on certain criteria and guidelines to avoid such pitfalls.

Anthony Coniaris summarizes six guidelines found in The *Philokalia*.<sup>12</sup> The first guideline of discerning whether something is in accordance with the will of God is the conscience. John Climacus said, "Let our God-direct conscience be our aim and rule in everything."<sup>13</sup> John Chrysostom also wrote, "Open the doors of your conscience and see the judge seat in your mind."<sup>14</sup> In addition, Isaiah the Solitary affirms human conscience to test the conformity with the will of God:

Once you have begun to seek God with true devotion and with all your heart, then you cannot possibly imagine that you already conform to his will. As long as your conscience reproves you for anything that you have done contrary to nature, you

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<sup>11</sup> Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven*, 207.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony M. Coniaris, *A Beginner's Introduction to the Philokalia* (Minneapolis: Light & Life Publishing Company, 2004), 42-46.

<sup>13</sup> Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven*, 200.

<sup>14</sup> Coniaris, *A Beginner's Introduction to the Philokalia*, 44.

are not set free: the reproof means that you are still under trial and have not yet been acquitted. But if you find when you are praying that nothing at all accuses you, then you are free and by God's will have entered into his peace.<sup>15</sup>

The second guideline given to Christians, Scripture, is the divinely revealed will and truth of God. Scripture reveals God's desire in general for human wellbeing and serves as a guide in every decision that a person is going to make. As a matter of fact, the Bible serves as normative in seeking God's guidance.

The third guideline of discernment is found in the ethical teachings of the Church. Stanley Harakas indicates, "The ethical rules of the Church are the accumulated wisdom of the Church. They serve to save continuous expenditure of time and energy in deciding anew each situation."<sup>16</sup> Once again, this ancient wisdom affirms that discernment is deeply rooted in wisdom of a faith community.

The fourth guideline, spiritual fathers or guides, may help to distinguish the truth from falsehood. Mark the Ascetic, for instance, urges his spiritual son Nicholas to "make an effort to keep company with, and be with and be under the guidance of experienced spiritual fathers. For it is dangerous to live alone, on one's own."<sup>17</sup> It is recognized in the church that spiritual counsel is indispensable in seeking divine wisdom, especially for new converts.

The fifth guideline of discernment is prayer, which lies at the center of people's spirituality, to listen to God's voice and see what God sees in their lives. The story of an

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<sup>15</sup> Allyne Smith, *Philokalia: The Eastern Christian spiritual Texts*, translated by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2006), Kindle Edition: Location 574-576.

<sup>16</sup> Coniaris, *A Beginner's Introduction to the Philokalia*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

anonymous Russian peasant – a Pilgrim, who practiced the Jesus Prayer day in and day out – illustrates how prayers play a critical role in one’s spiritual journey. To place one’s hope in God is to have his divine light and wisdom by which to live and by which to see the world; that it is to eminently see every man and every aspect of God’s creation as it really is in the eyes of God.<sup>18</sup>

The sixth guideline of discernment – the purity of heart – cleanses the eyes of the soul enabling people to see God and his holy will. Sin beclouds a person’s vision of God and the truth so that the human mind and heart have been distorted. Gregory of Nyssa elaborates, “Every passion bears within it the seed of death since it dulls the spirit of discernment.”<sup>19</sup> In order for effective discernment to take place, the human heart must be kept in a purified state through prayers and daily repentance.

### **Ignatian Spirituality and Divine Guidance**

Ignatius concludes there are three kinds of discernment as people cooperate with God in seeking his guidance for decision-making. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, he describes how to observe a person’s spiritual movements in discerning God’s guidance. All of these insights have become helpful tools in guiding people to seek God for many centuries.

#### **Three Times Election**

The first time (or kind) choice is unmistakably clear as people make decisions instantly without any doubt. This is when God so moves and attracts the will, that without

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<sup>18</sup> Helen Bacovcin, *The Way of a Pilgrim* (New York: Image Books, 2009), Kindle Edition: location 17.

<sup>19</sup> Coniaris, *A Beginner's Introduction to the Philokalia*, 46.

doubting, or being able to doubt, such a devout soul follows what is shown.<sup>20</sup> This kind of decision is not rare in real life, because people know what they should do by instinct without any hesitation. Phenomenologically, this first time of election can be viewed as a moment of peak religious experience as individuals may feel overwhelmed by an inner sense of certainty about their decisions.<sup>21</sup>

The second time choice is a situation in which the choice is not completely clear, at least initially. Alternative courses of a decision seem attractive to some degree, but without clear certainty for making decisions. In such a case, Ignatius suggests discerning a right choice through attending to the inner movement of a person's spirit, "when enough light and knowledge is received by experience of consolations and desolations, and by experience of discernment of various spirits."<sup>22</sup> This type of choice is a process, which God usually reveals his guidance through a step-by-step approach.

The third time choice, the most common decision-making process, is to choose with two or more good alternatives, neither one seems the obvious choice. In such a case, Ignatius offers an analytical approach to make the best decision. Timothy Gallagher, a well-respected scholar on Ignatian spirituality, describes the condition as: "The third mode of discernment presumes a time when the one discerning is calm and tranquil and so can reflect well on the reasons for each alternative. This is a heart neither powerfully

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<sup>20</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatian of Loyola*, translated by Elder Mullan (New York: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), Kindle Edition: Locations 1752-1756.

<sup>21</sup> Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 52.

<sup>22</sup> Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatian of Loyola*, Locations 1756-1758.

stirred by spiritual consolation nor troubled by spiritual desolation – a heart that is ‘not agitated by different spirits,’ and so ‘uses its natural powers freely and tranquilly.’”<sup>23</sup> To enter this type of discernment, a person must seek freedom from any passion or distraction so that she is able to exercise the natural power freely (a state of indifference). This is the condition of heart necessary for the third-time choice, which presupposes that God’s guiding influence can be felt in the process of reasoning, such as listing pros and cons for comparison, or seeking wisdom from trusted friends or mentors. Through the three times of election, Ignatius provides insights in seeking divine guidance through discerning the movement of spirits.

### The Inner Compass

Margaret Silf identifies some helpful signposts in discerning divine guidance; one of them is the inner compass. She believes that the inner compass, a gift of discernment, is given by the Holy Spirit who dwells in human hearts to guide a person seeking God, and thus no one is alone in making decisions. She elaborates this in her book, *Wise Choices*: “Intuition is something that dwells within us. It is an inner wisdom that prompts us gently about the right course to pursue. You could think of your own intuition as a kind of inner compass. If you reflect on it, you will recall times when you have followed it, it has served you well.”<sup>24</sup> To make this inner compass work properly, Silf assures that to use this tool of discernment people must come to the stillness: “In the silence of our

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God: An Ignatian Guide to Christian Decision Making* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), Kindle Edition: Location 1281-1285.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Silf, *Wise Choices: A Spiritual Guide to Making Life's Decisions* (New York: Blue Bridge, 2007), 46-52.

heart and our prayer, we must wait patiently for the compass needle to steady into stillness. Then it will point to true north, the still center, the fine point of soul, and we will be able to move again.”<sup>25</sup> (see Table 3 in Appendix B)

It is not an easy task to learn how to master this inner compass in decision-making since human emotions, like monsters, are difficult to tame at times, no one knows where they come from and where they go. Silf provides some suggestions. First, always talk to God about personal feelings, thank him for consolations that have been received and ask him for help in times of distress. Second, during the time of desolation, do not reverse decisions made in spiritual consolation. Third, reflect on experiences of how it feels when the compass is registering true north, and when it is not. She reasons that the remembered experiences stored in the inner map will serve well in the future.<sup>26</sup> Finally, it is critical to trust the inner compass, since this is an effective way to receive a divine message.

Therefore, it is possible to acquire skills of mastering the inner compass through encouragement and practice. In fact, the more one truly follows the inner compass, the easier it gets in the time of need.<sup>27</sup> Some people look at the inner compass with suspicion. It is true that human heart may become deceitful in seeking God, but it is also true that there is no better guide than the impression of the Holy Spirit. As long as people are not fooled by the self-deception, the inner compass can serve well as a trustful guide during the decision-making process.

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Silf, *Landmarks: An Ignatian Journey* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), 102.

<sup>26</sup> Silf, *Landmarks*, 106.

<sup>27</sup> Silf, *Wise Choices*, 56.



## The Deepest Desire

Desire has a bad reputation among Evangelical Christians; it is supposed that if a person desires a certain thing, it must be evil out of his or her own flesh. However, Silf assures the value of desire in human life: “Desire is energy, the energy of all creativity and the energy of life. So, let’s not be too hard on desire.”<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, James Martin sees desires as gifts from God playing a key role in decision-making among the Jesuits. Desire is a key part of Ignatian spirituality because it is a key way that God’s voice is heard in people’s lives, and ultimately the deepest desire, planted within humans, is his desire for God.<sup>29</sup>

There are two kinds of desires, Silf argues – deep desires and shallow desires. Shallow desires translate into wish lists, such as for occasions of holidays and of birthdays. But she invites readers to take a close look at a deep level of desiring, “Is there something you have always wanted to do, but never managed? What are your unfinished dreams? If you had your life over again, what would you change? . . . Take time to ponder one or more of these questions, the responses you make to yourself . . . will be pointers to where your deepest desires are rooted.”<sup>30</sup> The choices that nourish these deepest desires leave people feeling more in harmony with themselves and those they love, ultimately with God.

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<sup>28</sup> Silf, *Wise Choices*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 63.

<sup>30</sup> Silf, *Wise Choices*, 69.

Silf recommends, “We find our deepest desire not in our arriving, but in our journeying, not in the finding, but in the searching.”<sup>31</sup> The deepest desires are those that shape a person’s life, identify the one who he is to become, help him to know what he is to do, and guide him to discover God’s desires for the whole life. Sound spiritual discernment requires acknowledging that the root longing of human soul is for God, who alone can satisfy the heart’s deepest yearning.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Christian decision-making dictates taking human desires seriously because those deepest desires embedded in the soul lead people to God.

### Test the Choice

In *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius provides practical methods to test choices before implementation. One way of testing that may give a sense of clear direction is through reflection or reasoning in a decision-making process. Another way is to imagine living with each choice for a set period of time and seeing which choice gives the greater sense of peace.<sup>33</sup>

Based on the spiritual exercises of Ignatius, Silf summarizes some tests of choices in her book, *Wise Choice*.<sup>34</sup> In the ripple effect test, it is believed that people are all living in a community, so any decision may have an impact on the person making the decision as well as people living with her. In the pros and cons test, it is suggested to make a list of

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<sup>31</sup> Silf, *Landmarks*, 115.

<sup>32</sup> Au, *The Discerning Heart*, 145.

<sup>33</sup> Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, 317.

<sup>34</sup> Silf, *Wise Choices*, 87-93.

all the positives and negatives of each choice, pray for the list, and then ask God for confirmation. It is not uncommon that a person is able to figure out which option is the most favorable choice at the end of this exercise. This reflection in testing a person's choice is widely used in a decision-making process.

Ignatius makes good use of human imagination in designing testing methods. In the dry run test, a person lets each choice be alive in her mind and gives enough time to live with this option at least for a few days. In this way, the inner compass takes notice of the movement of the Spirit in her heart. In the deathbed test, Ignatius suggests imagining that at the point of death which option is most likely to be chosen. Since people tend to choose for their immediate interests, this exercise opens their eyes to see a picture of the whole life. In the advisor test, Ignatius asks the person to imagine someone whom the deciding person has never seen before, and imagine which advice she would give to this imagined person for the same choices that she is facing. This exercise may free the deciding person from the excessive focus on self.

These testing methods are quite helpful since confirmations should be sought in every decision, this may come in a simple way, or in a more dramatic manner. It is the pattern of "reflection-action-reflection," a person reflects on a decision, acts on it, sees what happens, and then reflects on that experience, leading to another decision. This is part of being a "contemplative in action," which is a person who is always reflecting on his active life,<sup>35</sup> and is well known as the way of Ignatian Spirituality.

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<sup>35</sup> Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, 322.

## The Thoughts of Dallas Willard and Divine Guidance

Dallas Willard, a prominent figure in the movement of spiritual formation, does not write on decision-making directly. But his book *Hearing God* provides many insights on this subject, just as its subtitle describes, “Develop a conversational relationship with God.”<sup>36</sup> In this book, Willard covers a broader theological base than divine guidance, and his understanding of a conversational relationship with God becomes a solid cornerstone in discerning God’s guidance.

### The Three Kingdoms

Willard writes extensively about the will of God in his books, for he understands the Kingdom of God to be the “effective range of God’s will.” And thus, the Kingdom is where God is currently or actively reigning. To state that God’s Kingdom is where he reigns is to equally recognize there are places and people where God’s Rule and Reign does not extend, or where God’s will is not currently applied.<sup>37</sup> Thus, there are competing “kingdoms” and wills that exist today, many of which are seen and experienced in action, and some of which actively oppose God’s will and Kingdom desires.

Willard identifies three kingdoms in his writings: Kingdom of God, kingdom of Satan and kingdom of Self, all are involved in seeking guidance from God (see Table 4 in Appendix B). “Every last one of us has a ‘kingdom’ or a ‘queendom’ or a ‘government’ –

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<sup>36</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*. Its first edition appeared in 1984, which is his first book on spirituality under the title “*In Search of Guidance*,” and this is his preferred title for this book.

<sup>37</sup> Gary Black, Jr., *The Theology of Dallas Willard: Discovering a Protoevangelical Faith* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 119.

a realm that is uniquely our own, where our choice determines what happens. Here is a truth that reaches into the deepest part of what it is to be a person. . . . Our kingdom is simply the range of our effective will.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, when a person’s aim is something other than God’s will, God lets him do that and stands aside. God does not like to be present where he is not wanted.<sup>39</sup> David Benner recognizes that the kingdom of self may be big or small, but it will be the sphere within which people live and die until they dare to step outside it and embrace the Kingdom of God with all of their might.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, God’s will of and God’s Kingdom cannot be separated in a decision-making process. Surrendering to God’s will begins by encountering God’s grandeur. It also involves falling in love with God’s grand plan of restoration of all things. This lies at the heart of God’s will and God’s Kingdom.<sup>41</sup> For this reason, seeking God’s guidance is to comply with the sovereign ruling of God in his Kingdom, and this only makes sense in the framework of the Kingdom of God. Willard assures, “Generally we are in God’s will whenever we are leading the kind of life he wants for us.”<sup>42</sup>

#### Four Ways of Experiencing God

Based on the above orientation, people are seeking divine guidance in a way of relating to God. Willard believes that God’s cooperative power and guidance are enacted

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<sup>38</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 21.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>40</sup> David G. Benner, *Desiring God’s Will* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 37.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 13.

through an act of prayer and intimate conversational relationship with God. He suggests that God desires good and moral choices to be made by his children within the context of freedom, which is essential for the development of fully capable, loving human beings. God's will, Willard explains, is for individuals to embody the character, which empowers them to freely "be" who they were created to be.<sup>43</sup> As Gary Black comments on Willard's position, "Through prayer, decisions are pondered, knowledge is accumulated, wisdom is provided, direction is gathered, and requests are made. Prayer then becomes the central means by which an individual gathers guidance and discernment in order to effectively 'rule' over his or her will and participate with God in the sphere of influence he or she maintains."<sup>44</sup>

Built upon this conviction, Willard further develops his theology into a deep level of conversational relationship with God. Steven Porter sees Willard's description of this relationship as an experiential reality with multi facets and dimensions, such as, intimate friendship, richly interactive relationship, close personal relationship, constant divine companionship, hand-in-hand, conversational walk with God.<sup>45</sup> This is also in agreement with Nouwen's assessment on the purpose of discernment,

The purpose of discernment is to know God's will, that is, to find, accept, and affirm the unique way in which God's love is manifest in our life. To know God's will is to actively claim an intimate relationship with God, ... It has nothing to do with passive submission to an external divine power that imposes itself on us. It has everything to do with active waiting on a God who waits for us.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Black, *The Theology of Dallas Willard*, 68.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>45</sup> Steve L. Porter, "The Willardian Corpus," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 3:2 (2010): 247.

<sup>46</sup> Nouwen, *Discernment*, Location 421.

Therefore, discerning the will of God is not equal to taking lots from the divine, rather it is based on a loving and dynamic relationship with God.

Willard distinguishes four ways how God can be experienced. First, the “Blind Faith,” in which a person has no awareness of God’s being here with him at all and no evidence of God’s action in or around him. Willard records his own experience: “One of the things I began to realize over time is that for many years God spoke to me and told me to do things, and I didn’t know it was him. I just thought it was me thinking.”<sup>47</sup> It is not surprising that the presence of God is often subtle, small, quiet, and hidden, coming to humans from something small, tender, and vulnerable, something hardly noticeable.<sup>48</sup> It is believed that through practice people may become accustomed to the voice of God and be familiar with God’s mind and thoughts.

Second, is “Sensing God’s Presence,” a concept that God must be here is an imprecise but often very powerful sense, feeling or impression of God’s presence.<sup>49</sup> It is no surprise that God’s attention to people results in their reciprocal awareness of his holy presence. This sensing is more likely reported by individuals who experience God in an overwhelming way, this sixth-sense reflection is difficult to explain but amazingly people may experience it from time-to-time. In this case, God’s guidance received by a person is remarkable clear.

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<sup>47</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Allure of Gentleness: Defending the Faith in the Manner of Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 152.

<sup>48</sup> Nouwen, *Discernment*, location 1892.

<sup>49</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 63-64.

Third, it is the “God who Acts,” which describes an experience accompanied by extraordinary events that cannot be attributed to merely natural causes. From the Apostle Paul to Ignatius, life beyond the natural always depends on intimate interactions between people and God, who is therefore present,<sup>50</sup> since there is a clear mark of the working of the Spirit in their lives. God still does wonders and signs in people’s lives to validate his work. In this case, God’s guidance is received with clarity beyond any doubts.

Fourth, it is called the “Conversational Relationship,” where God’s thoughts and intentions are consciously communicated to believers. When God gives his guidance to individuals, nothing is clearer than a whispering voice of the Spirit to direct people on the path that God leads them. This way of experiencing God proves to be the most significant given both human need for God and how God desires to work in people’s lives.<sup>51</sup> For this reason, conversing with God opens a more direct way to communicate with God. People being in such an intimate relationship know God’s intention simultaneously.

#### Understanding God’s Voice

Many Evangelicals believe that God still speaks to Christians today just as he spoke to Abraham and Moses in ancient times. Henry Blackaby affirms that God has not changed since he still speaks to his people: “If you have trouble hearing God speak, you are in trouble at the very heart of your Christian experience.”<sup>52</sup> Willard also confirms that God still speaks to his people through a still, small voice prompted by the Spirit. This

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<sup>50</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 66.

<sup>51</sup> Porter, "The Willardian Corpus," 247.

<sup>52</sup> Blackaby, *Experiencing God*, 133.



idea may be scary to someone but understanding God's voice is an integrated part of discerning God's guidance in people's lives.

In terms of divine guidance, each individual remains his own person as God speaks through his own language, understanding, deliberation, and decisions. Willard shares some guidance he received from his own experience, "Very often the word given to me is actually spoken by me."<sup>53</sup> It is surprising to recognize God's voice in this way. According to Willard, God always desires to communicate, so, it is much more important to cultivate the quiet, inward space of a constant listening than to always approach God for specific direction.<sup>54</sup> For this reason, he does not see this as a special privilege reserved for an elite group of people, rather it is reserved for everyone who desires to hear God's voice. Nouwen affirms that discernment is a way of life listening to a deeper sound and marching to a different beat, a life in which people become all ears."<sup>55</sup>

One of the most distinctive characteristics of God's voice is its superiority; no matter how the voice may come, even as the still, small voice within the silence of one's own mind, it bears the superiority over the other types of encounters.<sup>56</sup> Willard introduces three factors – quality, spirit, and content to distinguish God's voice from other voices:

First, the quality of the voice is easy to sense inwardly the immediate power as well as the immediate qualitative distinction of the voice. Second, the spirit of the voice is a spirit of the exalted peacefulness and confidence, of joy, of sweet reasonableness and of goodwill. Third, the content of the voice that is truly from

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<sup>53</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 87.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>55</sup> Nouwen, *Discernment*, Location 378.

<sup>56</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 144.

God will always conform to and be consistent with the truths about God's nature and kingdom that are made clear in the Bible.<sup>57</sup>

Just as Scripture says, "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy" (NASB, Js 3:17). Through experience and practice, Christians can receive divine guidance through listening to the small voice of God, which clearly distinguishes from other voices of this world. Therefore, God's voice is not the voice of a bully, though it bears authority itself, it does not need to be loud or hysterical.<sup>58</sup> Willard reminds his readers to always confirm what they hear from God if they believe that God told them to do something, and warns, "When God speaks to us, it does not prove that we are righteous or even right."<sup>59</sup> It seems possible to recognize God's voice through practice and experiences. As someone testifies that the very first time a person receives the guidance, she will know the difference. In addition, the still, small voice does not have to be interpreted.<sup>60</sup> Through practicing, people may become accustomed to listening to the voice of God.

Willard explores this dynamic relationship with God through hearing God's voice in daily life. Based on characteristics of God's voice and the analysis on prerequisites of a conversational relationship, Willard provides an effective approach in discerning God's guidance. Gary Moon points out the fundamentals of hearing God's voice that are deeply embedded in Willard's book:

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<sup>57</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 230-231.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 145, 230.

The point is, hearing God doesn't make much sense except within the context of living life a certain kind of way, the way of constant, ongoing, interactive friendship. . . . In such a transforming friendship with God, communication includes more than an exchange of words. It advances into deeper communion and consummation. . . . The goal is not hearing God. The goal is the enjoyment of a perpetual and transforming friendship.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, decision-making or discernment is not an automatic or mechanical process, as some techniques promise, this seeking process presupposes an intimate relationship in the context of a conversational interaction with God.

In summary, the understanding of discernment among desert dwellers as well as their discerning guidelines have become the backbone of the proposed Interactive Model. In addition, an Ignatian interpretation of human feelings and desires are surveyed to outline the discerning process in knowing and receiving divine guidance. Based on Willard's contribution on this subject, listening to God's voice is the most direct way to discern God's guidance. Therefore, in seeking divine guidance, people must become the kind of people who naturally and wisely hear from God. It is intended in this model that through seeking guidance people may cultivate a dynamic relationship with God and pursue their spiritual growth further in the decision-making process.

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<sup>61</sup> Gary W. Moon, *Apprenticeship with Jesus: Learning to Live Like the Master* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Books, 2009), Kindle Edition: location 2351.

## CHAPTER 5

### INTEGRATION OF THE INTERACTIVE MODEL

In this chapter, through integrating three Christian spiritualities – teachings of the desert dwellers, Ignatian exercises and Evangelical contributions to divine guidance, the basic structure of this new model is outlined to build a theological framework in terms of interactions between humans and God. Therefore, in this section seven theological presuppositions are discussed because of their importance in the development of this interactive decision-making model. In addition, four kinds of God's guidance are described as normative of God's interactions with people in a decision-making process. Finally, discerning rules are introduced to aid participants in noticing the movements of spirits in the process.

#### **Understanding God's Will**

Simply speaking, the will of God is his desire for things to happen. However, this is completely up to the degree of his own determination. No one knows how much God allows his will to be resisted in a certain case and how much freedom he decides to give for the sake of human free will. Mystery remains with God (Dt 29:29), but it is obvious

that in the created world God wills his creation into existence and desires to communicate his will to humans, so they may become a part of his plan into the eternity.

The term “God’s will” is commonly used among Evangelical Christians, but few are certain about the meaning of the term. God’s will may be comprised of a wide range of meanings in the Scriptures. Therefore, this term represents a complicated theological concept, involving knowing God and his attributes and understanding how God interacts with humans in this created world. Before exploring God’s will further, it is important to clearly define the term and understand the correlation between God’s will and human capacity of discerning his guidance.

Theologians deal primarily with the will of God as an attribute or capacity. God's will is his ability to choose, to cause (or to allow) things to happen.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, this means that understanding God’s will is to know him as a person and to live in a dynamic relationship with him. On the other hand, God’s will cannot be separated from God’s Kingdom. According to Willard, the Kingdom of God is simply the range of God’s effective will.<sup>2</sup>

Three things about God’s will are clearly revealed in the book of Ephesians, the pleasure of God’s will (Eph 1:5), the secrets of God’s will (1:7), as well as the counsel of God’s will (1:11). According to Paul, God predestines salvation and reveals his desires through commandments and guidance for a holy living. Based on this description, three

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<sup>1</sup> G. T. Manley and F. F. Bruce, “God: His Will,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, eds. I. Howard Marshall et al (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 419.

<sup>2</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 21.

aspects of God's will have been observed. In this paper, the three aspects are referred to as God's sovereign will, God's moral will, and God's personal will respectively.

The first aspect is God's sovereign will, in which God determines everything that happens, has happened and will inevitably happen.<sup>3</sup> In general, God's will in this aspect is hidden unless God chooses to reveal it in the Bible. This aspect is often used to refer to God's eternal plan, decrees, and sovereign rulership over the world. The second aspect is God's moral will, which includes God's commands revealed in Scripture to guide human being's living. This aspect of God's will is clearly made known and can be resisted by humanity's free will. This is what God desires and brings him great pleasure if people choose to follow. Of course, there are serious consequences when people decide to go against God's commands. The third aspect is God's personal will, which describes God's intention for a person's life. This aspect is related to the subject of seeking guidance (See Table 5 in Appendix B).

It is quite a challenge to diagram theological concepts; therefore, this chart is less concerned with accuracy, but better understanding (see Figure 5 in Appendix A). Circle 1 represents the sovereign will of God and Circle 2 represents the moral will of God. The non-overlapped area in Circle 1 represents the permissive will of God, since there is evil in this world. Both circles are overlapped in the area representing the effective will of God, that is, the part of God's will fulfilled in this world. The non-overlapped area in Circle 2 represents God's will that has not been realized in this world. This chart is how

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<sup>3</sup> Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 8.

Douglas Huffman diagrams the two aspects of God's will,<sup>4</sup> but in this paper the third aspect of God's will is added to this diagram. The straight line represents aspects of God's personal will, and this line falls into three segments. Segment A represents the part of people's life realized outside God's desire because of human failure to follow God's commands. Segment B represents the part of people's life fulfilled God's desire. Segment C represents the part of people's life unrealized in the world according to God's plan. Seeking divine guidance means to discern God's personal will for individuals, which is in line with the representation of Segment B.

Although there is a difference between the sovereign will and the moral will, it is important to note the unity of God's will in this discussion, since the will of God cannot be divided into categories, separated one from another. These aspects like lenses provide means to aid people's understanding of this complex issue, through them God's will may be viewed from different angles to be understood more comprehensively. Based on biblical revelations, it is recognized that God's will is not impersonal, and cannot be reducible to a code of law. Nor is it primarily about what people should do. It is deeply personal and inherently relational, and thus it can never be meaningfully separated from God's Spirit and presence.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, to know God's will is equivalent to live in the dynamic relationship with God. As believers strive to seek and do the will of God, their relationships with God evolve into a deeper level of intimacy.

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<sup>4</sup> Huffman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 100.

<sup>5</sup> Benner, *Desiring God's Will*, 58.

## **Seven Theological Presuppositions**

In this section, seven theological presuppositions to biblical revelation of divine-human relationship are elaborated based on Evangelical understandings of seeking divine guidance. These theological insights serve as the foundation of this new model because of their contributions to developing an interactive relationship with God. In addition, they also become the necessary principles in guiding a person's discerning practices. These are, in order: God has a plan for each of his children, and he chooses to work out these details with them interactively. Then, out of covenantal grace, God is willing to make his plan known to his people. God is free to choose any ways to communicate with his guidance, through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, the faith community, spiritual counsels, and any other means he deems appropriate. God desires an intimate relationship with his people, and he invites them for daily walk with him consistently. Out of his divine love, he grants free will to his people to make their own choice. God guides each person differently, even for the same person he may lead him in different ways at times. Out of his sovereignty, he makes things work together for the goodness of his people, even at times they decide not to follow his guidance. These principles are foundational for understanding a relationship between humans and the divine and thus become helpful guidelines for believers to seek God's guidance effectively.

The First Principle: The Blueprint Model claims that God has a detailed plan for each individual while The Wisdom Model argues the non-existence of such a plan. In the proposed model, it is believed that God has a plan for each of his children as so many biblical passages and examples support the idea of God's plan for his people. However, this does not necessarily mean that his plan is predestined as blueprints. In response to



Friesen, Smith makes a good argument for the case of God's plan: "I believe this is a more accurate way of explaining the paradox of human freedom vs. God's personal will than to dispense with the latter altogether. In reality we need both of these concepts – that we are free to choose, and that God ultimately has a personal will for our choice."<sup>6</sup> In addition, the giving of divine guidance is prescribed in the Bible as one of roles of the indwelling Spirit (Jn 16:12-13).

The Second Principle: God desires to be known. However, instead of demanding God's people to do what he wants, he invites them to join him in the things he is doing, and patiently waiting for their responses. God is good; he does not hide, nor intend to mislead. Out of covenantal grace, God would like his children to know his plan for them. Sometimes he withholds information from his people, either they are not ready to receive, or it is better for them to learn at another time. For this reason, he communicates his guidance and ensures the wellbeing of his people. Since not all decisions are prescribed in the Bible, it is necessary for this kind of personal communication to take place in order to promote the desired spiritual growth.

The Third Principle: God has chosen many ways to communicate with his people through biblical history such as dreams, visions, voices and direct encounter. There is no clear statement in the Bible that God will stop doing this, therefore, it is believed that God continues to communicate his guidance in different ways for the eternal purpose. For this reason, he is not limited by anyone except himself in ways how to communicate his plan with his children. In another word, no one should limit God's communication in one

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Knowing God's Will*, 239.

way or another, since God is free to choose whatever he deems appropriate to relay his messages. Therefore, people should keep their mind open when approaching God for divine guidance.

The Fourth Principle: God continues to work in people's life and brings them into an intimate relationship with him. Willard describes the nature of this divine-human relationship: "God calls us to a direct and fully self-conscious, personal relationship with him, in which we share responsibility with him in the exercise of his authority."<sup>7</sup> It is in this context that God guides his people out of divine love, and thus his guidance should be followed through unwavering confidence in his faithfulness.

The Fifth Principle: God prefers an interactive relationship in decision-making, so he lets his children decide whether to follow his guidance. God invites them to join what he is doing, but he grants them freedom to accept or reject his guidance for the ultimate glory of God. Therefore, seeking guidance is not one-way communication – God simply tells people what to do – rather God's guidance comes in mutual interactions between human and the Divine. By doing so, he makes this relationship much more meaningful.

The Sixth Principle: Let God be God, no one dictates him how to deal with his creature. He may lead one person in this way, and direct another in a different manner. Even for the same person, God may lead him in different patterns at different seasons of this person's life. Therefore, it is acknowledged that there is no certain pattern to be normalized as the standard way God delivers his messages. On the contrary, it is wise to be open-minded as people receive God's guidance for decision-making. After all, he is an

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<sup>7</sup> Willard, *Hearing God*, 62.

omniscient and omnipotent God, and surely knows the best way to communicate his guidance.

The Seventh Principle: no matter how people decide among many choices, they are assured that God always walks with them through this life journey. It is not likely that God would forsake his chosen ones because of bad decisions being made in the past. J. I. Packer assures, “Guidance, like all God’s acts of blessing under the covenant of grace, is a sovereign act. God wills to guide us in more fundamental sense of ensuring that, whatever happens, whatever mistakes we may make, we shall come safely home.”<sup>8</sup> With such confidence in God who loves and guides in life-changing decisions, Christians are supposed to set off freely to enjoy being with God in the decision-making process.

#### **Four Kinds of God’s Guidance**

Not everyone receives guidance in the same way on their spiritual journeys, and not all decisions are equally important. Therefore, God may choose many ways to communicate his guidance. It is important to notice different aspects of the complicated interactions, so that the proposed model will not be one-size-fits-all but can be adapted to situations. In this section, thoughts from the desert dwellers, Ignatius, and Dallas Willard are integrated into understanding the diversity of God’s guidance.

#### **The Integrated Observations**

The desert dwellers observed that there are different levels of discernment in the stages of a believer’s faith journey. Therefore, the proposed interactive model must take

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<sup>8</sup> Packer, *Knowing God*, 241.

this into consideration and make it adaptable to various groups of believers. In addition, Ignatius enriches the understanding of guidance by proposing three types of election in a decision-making process. Willard proposes four ways how God can be experienced in seeking divine guidance. Based on the discussion in Chapter 4 and through integrating these thoughts into this interactive decision-making model, it is thus proposed there are four kinds of interactions between humans and the divine, and each represents a unique way of God revealing his guidance and interacting with humans for delivering guidance.

The four kinds of God's guidance are presented as normative in seeking guidance (See Table 6 in Appendix B). The first kind is direct encounter since God directs humanity for decisions with remarkable clarity. This awareness may come in a special encounter with God, together with other supernatural revelations of God's will or himself. Instantly the person knows that it is from God, and this invitation is irresistible. Ignatius identifies this type of decision as the first time or kind while Willard describes this encounter with God as "God who Acts." In the Bible, for example, God's calling of Abram, Moses or Paul falls into this category.

The second kind is overwhelming presence, since God encourages people through a strong sense of his presence just as Willard puts it. God's guidance is clear in this case, and it is up to each person to make the decision. However, the choice becomes so obvious that it is impossible to miss the message. In the Gospel, when Jesus called his disciples to follow him, this is how they received this kind of invitation.

The third kind is progressive leading, which Ignatius names as the second type of choice, in which God leads through a step-by-step approach. This is the most common way people experience God in decision-making. Smith observes in the Bible that God's

guidance was experienced only incrementally, in the step-by-step, light-onto-one's-path fashion, with just enough light to move into next step.<sup>9</sup> This is where discerning rules are applied, becoming the primary focus in the Interactive Model.

The fourth kind is unnoticeable guidance, in which God leaves a person alone to make decisions. It does not mean that God does nothing at all, he may work behind the scene, but the person is unaware of his presence. For this reason, Willard calls it “Blind Faith,” corresponding to the third type of decision in the *Ignatian Exercises*, in which reason is the primary means for discernment. This kind of experience may happen to anyone, people who are new to Christian faith, as well as to those who have been closely walking with God. Other scholars label this kind of guidance – God guiding his people “behind the scenes.” Philip Jensen and Tony Payne observe, “In his sovereign, irresistible way, God works in all things to move his people along the path he has planned for them.”<sup>10</sup> People do not notice this kind of guidance in advance, but after the event, they come to realize that God works all things together for their own good (see Figure 6 in Appendix A and Table 7 in Appendix B).

#### A Biblical Example

Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 15-18) is the best illustration of these four types of guidance. When Paul came to Galatia, the Holy Spirit forbid them to preach in Asia (Acts 16:6-7). It is likely that this assurance came with a supernatural sign because

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Knowing God's Will*, 41.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Jensen and Tony Payne, *Guidance and the Voice of God* (Kingsford, AU: Matthias Media, 2012), Kindle Edition: Location 669.

twice in the verse the Holy Spirit was mentioned, and thus God's guidance becomes clear and irresistible in this case. This is the first kind of encountering God in decision-making. As Paul was waiting for the next step of his missionary journey, he received the vision of a Macedonian; this powerful image incidentally directed the course of Paul's second missionary journey into Europe. Through divine presence Paul unmistakably understood the instruction that God delivered in this extraordinary experience. Therefore, it becomes an example of the second kind of God's guidance described above.

Upon their arrival in Macedonia, God led Paul to move from one place to another through a step-by-step approach, which is the third kind of God's guidance. Paul's choice of their destination cities was pushed by persecutions (certainly this is God's leading too). Finally, through a vision, God directed him to stay in Corinth for an extended period. In each city he stayed, Paul followed the same pattern to preach the Gospel, first to Jews in synagogues and then to the Gentiles. This is the way of wisdom because it was natural to reach Jews first since they were God's chosen people waiting for the coming Messiah. It becomes obvious that Paul's strategy of preaching the Gospel falls into the fourth kind of guidance. Therefore, all four kinds of God's guidance have been witnessed in Paul's missionary journey, and they may all be present in today's Christian life as well.

### **Rules of Discernment**

It is beneficial to begin this section with Nouwen's definition: "Discernment is a spiritual understanding and an experiential knowledge of how God is active in daily life that is acquired through disciplined spiritual practice."<sup>11</sup> This affirms discernment as both

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<sup>11</sup> Nouwen, *Discernment*, Location 349.

a spiritual gift and a spiritual discipline. Nouwen believes that Christian discernment is not the same as decision making: “Discernment is about listening and responding to that place within people where their deepest desires align with God’s desire.”<sup>12</sup>

### Understanding Discernment

It is arguable that discernment lies at the heart of Christian spirituality, but it has been well recognized that there is no central theme in Christian spirituality more than discernment. The basic element of Ignatian discernment is rooted in the experiences of Ignatius, as well as his observations about how God worked in the lives of others.<sup>13</sup>

David Lonsdale defines that discernment is the art of appreciating the gifts that God has given to his people and discovering how they may best respond to that love in daily life.<sup>14</sup>

In a similar way, Sue Pickering states, “The process of discernment is more an art than an exact science, and the results often more tentative than precise. At the heart of the process must be the deep desire to do the will of God.”<sup>15</sup> David Fleming notices the importance of the rules of discernment: “One of Ignatius’ greatest gifts is his Rules for Discernment which form part of the Spiritual Exercises. He showed how God speaks a language to us through our feelings. Prayer, a growing familiarity with God, and an intimate knowledge of Jesus and his actions are all elements of a discerning heart. To follow Jesus, we need

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<sup>12</sup> Robert A. Jonas, “Henri’s Way of Discernment,” in *Discernment* (New York: HarperOne: 2013), Kindle Edition: Locations 166.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, 309.

<sup>14</sup> Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Sue Pickering, *Spiritual Direction: A Practical Introduction* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2008), 75.

to know how to make good decisions.”<sup>16</sup> These statements have captured the essence of Ignatian discernment that take focus on an interactive relationship with God. Discernment is learning to be attentive to these subtle movements and counter-movements toward and away from God. Attending the feelings that predictably correspond to each heart direction can help people discern God’s will.<sup>17</sup> This is an important way to discern God’s guidance in a decision-making process.

The Discernment of spirits treated by Ignatius in his rules for discernment (in *Spiritual exercises*, no. 313-36), is not the same process as seeking to discern God’s will (*Spiritual Exercises*, no.169-88), though facility in discernment of spirits is an important, even necessary, aid in discerning God’s will.<sup>18</sup> The discernment of spirits has to do with distinguishing among the stirrings of people’s hearts that which is of God and that which is not. It helps keep the distinction between these two kinds of discernment in mind while studying the Ignatian discernment. George Traub writes, “In this second mode (or time) of discernment, discernment of spirits and discernment of God’s will coincide: through discernment of consolations and desolations – through discernment of spirits – a person attains ‘sufficient clarity and understanding’ for discernment of God’s will – that is, sufficient clarity regarding which option God wills in this choice.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> David L. Fleming, *What is Ignatian Spirituality?* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), Kindle Edition: Location 576-578.

<sup>17</sup> Benner, *Desiring God's Will*, 107.

<sup>18</sup> George W Traub, "Discernment," in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. George Traub (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 152.

<sup>19</sup> Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, Location 1072.



## Six Discerning Rules

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius provides two sets of rules for discernment: the first is composed of fourteen rules and the second set eight rules. He intends the rules to guide those in a time of prayer who are seeking the will of God. For this reason, they are adapted in this decision-making model as discerning guidelines. Based on observations in the literature, six rules have been selected in this model to guide the discerning process.

The first discerning rule in seeking God's guidance is about the disposition of the heart. For the desert dwellers, discernment was the centerpiece of their spiritual lives. In order to discern God's guidance well, people must prepare their hearts to be conditioned to meet God. It is the disposition of heart, which best permits a person to discern God's will. Timothy Gallagher elaborates on this freedom: "We are free to hear whatever God will say to us, free from all that might limit our readiness to respond, and free to say yes wholeheartedly to God's will."<sup>20</sup> George Muller comments on this, "Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our heart is ready to do the Lord's will."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, without this kind of preparing people's heart, discernment cannot be made possible.

The second discerning rule is to make decisions in times of spiritual consolation. The first question always to be asked in discernment is: Is this person moving away from God and toward serious sin as a fundamental direction of life; or is this person sincerely striving to overcome sin and grow closer to God as a fundamental direction in life?<sup>22</sup> As

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<sup>20</sup> Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, Location 443.

<sup>21</sup> Muller, *Answers to Prayer from George Muller's Narrative*, Location 13.

<sup>22</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits: An Ignatian Guide to Everyday Living* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005), Kindle Edition: Location 979.

a person moves toward God, his heart is filled with full of joy and hope, and he is ready to make wise decisions.

The third rule is not to make any change in times of spiritual desolation, because decisions made in time of spiritual consolation should not be changed in times of distress. God gives spiritual consolation; God never gives spiritual desolation. However, he does permit the enemy to give people spiritual desolation at times for reasons that lay within his loving providence.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the source of spiritual desolation comes from the bad spirit or fallen human nature. For this reason, it is best for a person not to change her mind in times of spiritual desolation.

The fourth discerning rule is to reject any ideas and suggestions generated from times of spiritual desolation. Discernment is concerned specifically with the thoughts that come from spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation; those that come from spiritual desolation are to be rejected,<sup>24</sup> since those dark, negative, and distressed thoughts come from the enemy. In addition, Ignatius instructs how to discern thoughts of good spirits and those of bad spirits. Assuming a person is moving toward God, if the initial touch with these thoughts is gentle like water hitting a sponge, then they may be of good spirits:

When, however, the bad spirit approaches persons proceeding from good to better with his deceptive good and holy thoughts, then, Ignatius says, these thoughts will touch the soul “sharply and with noise and disquiet, as when the drop of water falls on a stone,” and will enter the soul “with clamor and sensible disturbances, perceptibly,” as does a person who forcibly enters a house not his own.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, Location 1763.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 1831.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy M. Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation: An Ignatian Guide to the Greater Discernment of Spirit* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007), Location 1826.

The awareness of the resource of thoughts is the first step in discerning the guidance in decision-making.

The fifth discerning rule is to examine the feeling of “peace” in seeking guidance, because not all spiritual consolation comes from God. Peaceful feelings are landmarks to confirm guidance received from God, but the enemy may attempt to deceive under an appearance of good as a person seeks to discern God’s guidance. True peace from God distinguishes clearly from false peace that comes from the enemy or a deceitful heart.

Trevor Hudson describes this God-given inner peace:

To put it plainly, when God leads and guides us, we experience a profound sense of peace about the decision we are making. The peace given by God’s Spirit endures through all the ups and downs of our more fleeting emotions and moods. It does not guarantee the absence of trouble; rather, it produces a strong conviction, even in the midst of trouble, that God is with us and we are not alone. For this reason, an inner joy, serenity, and aliveness usually accompany the peace given by the Holy Spirit, no matter what is happening around us.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, it is important to discern spiritual consolation received so that “false peace” is not able to deceive the discerning person.

The sixth discerning rule is that not all thoughts from spiritual consolation can be accepted without being carefully examined. Ignatius says, when there was no preceding cause and spiritual consolation is experienced in which the person is drawn “totally in love of his divine majesty,” that person may be sure that the spiritual consolation and the content given within it are of God.<sup>27</sup> However, for spiritual consolation with preceding cause, it may be of the good or of the bad spirit. Many people with good intentions and

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<sup>26</sup> Trevor Hudson, *Beyond Loneliness: The Gift of God’s Friendship* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2016), Kindle Edition: 90.

<sup>27</sup> Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation*, Location 980.

holy motives to serve God make some choices that led to spiritual harm for themselves and others around them. Therefore, it is discovered that as spiritual growth continues, a time may come when spiritual consolation can no longer simply be accepted as of the good spirit but must itself be carefully discerned.<sup>28</sup>

It is challenging to make use of this rule in the discerning process. Regardless of impetus of these thoughts, there is no difference in content, but the thoughts are proved to come from the bad spirit if they have run their course, lead to something bad, distractive or less good than these persons had proposed to do before; or they weaken, disquiet, or trouble these dedicated persons, stripping away their former spiritual peace in God.<sup>29</sup> In another word, if the beginning, middle, and end of their course are all good and inclined to all good, then discernment is clear: the good spirit is at work.<sup>30</sup>

In summary, six discerning rules, integrated primarily from Ignatian Spirituality, have been proven beneficial through the course of hundreds of years in church history. These become guiding principles when people reflect on their spiritual movements during the time of discernment, which may lead the discerning person to a final decision based on what they perceive spiritual movements in their heart.

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<sup>28</sup> Gallagher, *Spiritual Consolation*, Location 339.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 1552.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 1406.

PART THREE  
MINISTRY PRACTICE

## CHAPTER 6

### THE FRAMEWORK OF THE INTERACTIVE MODEL

Discerning God's guidance in a process of decision-making continues to draw great attention among Christians and scholars, as people increasingly face the pressure to make decisions with complex choices. The problem of decision-making is not lack of information, instead there is too much information to process in a limited time. Therefore, it is common for people to become confused or frustrated in the whole process.

It is obvious, based on the literature review in Chapter 3, that this is a complex subject. There does not seem to be a single model for all circumstances that people encounter in their lives. Each model offers a good approach to understanding divine guidance, but show limitations in application to real life situations. In general, the three models seem complementary not contradictory. For this reason, this new model provides an alternative way to seek divine guidance with flexibility and adaptability. This new model is proposed to guide Christians discerning God's guidance based on learning from ancient Christian traditions and Evangelical understandings of divine guidance.

In this chapter, the Interactive Model is fully outlined based on the integration of Christian spiritualities in Chapter 5. Discerning guidelines and means of discernment for

this model are drawn from previous discussions. To apply these conclusions into the HCI decision-making project, a three-step interactive procedure is presented and its relevance to the HCI project is also taken into consideration.

### **The Interactive Scope**

The Interactive Model assumes that in seeking divine guidance both God and the interested person are working together actively in the process of decision-making. Many make choices based on their focus in the process or methods, but the centrality of seeking God's guidance lies with dynamic interaction between God and humans. To discern well means to understand clearly who God is, where humans stand before God, the way God directs each person, and how much people can do to facilitate the discerning process. For this reason, it is necessary to build up the framework of this project through outlining the practical guidelines and the structure of the HCI decision-making project.

### **Guidelines in Seeking Guidance**

Guidelines in seeking guidance have been well preserved throughout church history. For the proposed Interactive Model, this is no exception, setting up boundaries in seeking divine guidance based on guidelines that have been proved trustworthy through faithful Christians from past generations. In this section, six guidelines in seeking God's guidance are to be integrated to form the basic boundary of this new model.

Chapter 4 discussed six guidelines from the Orthodox Church, which have served well in discerning God's guidance for centuries. In addition, Muller of the nineteenth century drafted six steps to ascertain God's will. Since then his method has influenced many Evangelicals in their thinking on decision-making. These thoughts are compared

with John Wesley's quadrilateral to bring insights from valuable traditions to the current discussion of a new model (see Table 8 in Appendix B).

The first guideline of seeking guidance is never to make decisions contrary to Scripture. The Bible is the Word of God and continues to serve as normative for people seeking God's guidance. Whenever the Scripture commands, there is clear guidance for people to do according to God's revealed will. Among all biblical scholars, there is little disagreement about the importance of the Bible in a decision-making process.

The second guideline is never to make decisions contrary to ethical teachings of the Church. God has handed down rich traditions over thousands of years to Christians of this age so that these teachings can serve as check points in seeking divine guidance. It is dangerous to forget those who have walked in the same faith before, since there are many valuable things that believers of this century can learn from their experience.

The third guideline is never to make decisions contrary to the conscience. Human conscience was contaminated at the time of Adam's fall, but never completely ruined. For Christians, as a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), their conscience continues to be renewed through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, conscience can also serve as valuable in seeking God's guidance. If one's heart does not feel right about something, though this may not violate the teaching of the Bible and the Church, it is best to examine carefully the choice before making a final decision.

The fourth guideline is to make decisions in the context of a person's orientation in this world. If a person knows the direction that God leads him in this life, it is easier for him to make other decisions by following the same direction. Silf says, "When we nurture the habit of being careful about the bigger things, the smaller things will begin to



follow the same kind of pattern, though we will be unconscious of this.”<sup>1</sup> For instance, if a person knows that God calls him or her to be a doctor, or a teacher, or a minister, other related decisions easily fall into their places. Therefore, it is critical to settle these life-shaping decisions before seeking God’s guidance in other areas of a person’s life.

The fifth guideline is to consider providential circumstances before deciding. There is a common error where people make decisions regardless of their personal desires and spiritual gifts, as if God miraculously provides whatever they need for every decision in their lives. On the contrary, God often directs people through things that he has already given. Therefore, it is unwise to ignore providential circumstances when a person considers different options in decision-making.

The sixth guideline is to make decisions with the support of a spiritual director or the counsel of a spiritual mentor. No one can make a wise decision without support, for the enemy desires that the faithful person in affliction receive and keep his workings in their hearts secretly, carrying them in silence and alone.<sup>2</sup> For Ignatius, a competent spiritual guide always accompanies discernment of God’s will.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is not an option to make decisions without the support of other Christians.

For this reason, people who seek divine guidance must have a spiritual guide, and it is best that they may have a group of Christians (or a local church) to support their spiritual journeys, since this is the only way to break the dark power of secrecy from the evil spirit. This is particularly critical for the HCI project since many participants are new

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<sup>1</sup> Silf, *Wise Choices*, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Gallagher, *The Discernment of Spirits*, Location 3700.

<sup>3</sup> Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, Location 779.

to Christian faith; the support of a spiritual community is essential for believers and seekers to make wise decisions, especially when facing complex choices. In a word, these six guidelines function as guiding principles so that this interactive decision-making model can be built upon a solid ground.

### The Initiative of the HCI Project

Based on the theological presuppositions discussed above, several conclusions on divine guidance can be summarized and applied to the Interactive Model so that it is applicable to the current project at HCI. In addition, these assumptions are outlined to build a groundwork for application of the model. Here is a list of conclusions drawn from the seven theological presuppositions described in Chapter 5: God meets people where they are. God takes initiative in providing guidance for his people. God chooses to work interactively with his people in the process of seeking divine guidance. People's inability to receive divine guidance comes from self-deception or the influence of the evil spirit or this world, not from God. A person's life orientation toward God makes a difference in seeking divine guidance. It is in the setting of a faith community that each person makes her own choice.

First, God meets people where they are. For anyone who desires to seek God for guidance, God is not only willing, but also able to reveal himself. In another word, there is no prerequisite or qualification for people to seek divine guidance. Biblical knowledge or a person's spiritual maturity may be helpful but does not guarantee fruitful attempts in discerning guidance. For this reason, it is believed that God responds to people's requests of seeking no matter where they are on their spiritual journey.

Second, it is God's responsibility to provide guidance and make it known to his people. Meanwhile, it is humanity's responsibility to maintain a good standing before God. Anything hindering the relationship must be removed prior to seeking divine guidance effectively, so it is unnecessary to struggle in discerning because it is God's job to make his guidance received by his people. In this process, it is critical to distinguish between what people should do and what people cannot do. From an experiential aspect of seeking divine guidance, it is certainly not a game of hide-and-seek with God.

Third, decision-making works better when there is a collaboration between God and humans. This is the interactive and intimate relationship in play, since God does not make decisions for his people and then carry them out by himself. The process of seeking requires discernment, willingness, and action of the participating person to complete. On the other hand, no one can make a wise decision on his own without consulting the all-wise God. Through this kind of interaction with God, a decision is made as the result of a trusting relationship and an opportunity of growing a person's spiritual strength.

Fourth, difficulty in receiving God's guidance comes from people's fallen nature and influence of the evils in this world. God desires his guidance to be known, if a person becomes confused or cannot receive the message correctly, the problem does not resonate with God. This truly reminds that seeking guidance is not second-guessing what God has in mind for a particular decision, rather it demands each person prepare herself well to receive divine messages without interference from background noises or distractions.

Fifth, seeking God's guidance is not divination, therefore, there is no reason to be obsessed with techniques. Instead one should turn himself to God. Bruce Waltke points out, "All of this divination activity does little other than confuse people. Meanwhile a

loving and patient God waits for his people to turn to him in obedience.”<sup>4</sup> Relationship matters in seeking guidance, however, this may mislead people to think that an intimate relationship is a prerequisite in seeking guidance, or that a better relationship places a person in a better position to know God’s mind. In the Interactive Model, it is supposed that life orientation toward God, not the relationship with God, is required in seeking guidance. Anyone who calls God’s name for help is able to find God in her search for divine guidance, because God meets people where they are.

Sixth, it is imperative to seek God’s guidance in the setting of a faith community. In this project, each person is required to participate in a large group (ten-to-fifteen people) in seeking guidance, and each also joins a small group of four-to-five persons for sharing, listening, encouraging, and mutual support during the two-day retreat. For new believers or seekers, it is particularly helpful to experience God’s presence in such a faith community. In addition, with the assistance of a spiritual director or guide, participants are expected to avoid common errors in discerning God’s guidance. Therefore, no one in the Interactive Model decides alone since faith community plays a critical role in helping people discern God’s guidance.

### **The Interactive Procedure**

Based on discussion of six discerning guidelines in Chapter 5, three interactive steps are proposed in this section. In addition, the detailed decision-making procedure is outlined as a step-by-step approach to guide individuals during the retreat for a particular decision. As a result, a decision-making flow chart is designed and becomes a helpful aid

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<sup>4</sup> Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 40.

for participants to follow in their two-day retreat. This interactive procedure is a critical part of a retreat experience in seeking divine guidance.

### Three Interactive Steps

It is proposed in this model that through a three-step practice – preparation, reflection and confirmation – each person is able to find divine guidance. This interactive procedure is directed in a two-day retreat and guided by a pastor or spiritual leader. Together with a group of ten-to-fifteen people, each learns to discern God’s guidance. During the retreat, a small group is assigned for sharing practicing experience, and participants practice the three steps individually to make a choice based on receiving God’s guidance. This interactive model is designed to guide participants in these steps to encounter God, to discern divine guidance and to learn more about God’s purpose in their life during this decision-making process.

In the first step, a person is to prepare her heart before entering a discerning process. It is imperative to dispose any inclination toward decisions and purify a person’s motives before receiving divine guidance. This opening of the human heart to the Savior’s healing love – to freedom from the burden of sin – is the first key step in preparing people for discernment.<sup>5</sup> Humanity’s reaching for God is often hidden, disguised as a vague dissatisfaction or a yearning for something other than God.<sup>6</sup> This tendency has to be dealt with in this initial stage of discernment. Gallagher identifies

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<sup>5</sup> Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, Location 590.

<sup>6</sup> Bieber, *Decision-making and Spiritual Discernment*, Location 265.

three marks of the disposition: foundational awareness of God's infinite love, a healing encounter with Jesus who loves to the death to free personal sin and burden, and, at the heart of all, the continuing quest for heartfelt knowledge and growing love for Christ.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is recommended to take as much time as needed in this stage of preparation to achieve the state of a still heart for discernment.

The second step is the major section of the whole process, reflecting on God, self and the situation. Many spiritual disciplines such as meditation, prayer, contemplation, spiritual conversation and journaling may be adopted to discern guidance. There are three components in this stage of reflection. The first is to reflect on who God is and what he is doing in this person's life naturally, guiding the transition to this step. The confidence in God who provides guidance grows as a person's heart and mind move aligned with that of Christ. Any doubts or anxiety about the decision or those possible outcomes may be removed as the result of this reflection.

The second component is to reflect on self, the art of knowing self lies in facing what is real and true and seeing it clearly. Bieber reminds, "Who we are, where we are now – that is the starting point for all our decisions."<sup>8</sup> It is time to review the past and to learn from success as well as mistakes. To reflect on past experience is the best way to secure future decisions. This survey also includes a review of present circumstances, which proves to be beneficial as a person moves closer to the deciding moment. To see the big picture of a person's life, like astronauts look at earth from space, provides a

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<sup>7</sup> Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, Location 646.

<sup>8</sup> Bieber, *Decision-making and Spiritual Discernment*, Location 710.

better understanding of life purpose, mission and journey into the eternity that God intends for his children.

Finally, the third component of reflection is to reflect on a person's circumstance. At this point, it is crucial to notice thoughts and feelings, particularly signposts showing the deepest desire. The inner compass described by Silf can be a helpful tool in exploring how God wires a person and the best choice in the course of her life. This is the deciding moment that has been long prepared for by listening attentively to God's voice as well as desires of the heart. Discernment in this stage means the ability to make distinctions, being able to distinguish between those impulses that come from ego needs and those that arise from the authentic, true self.<sup>9</sup> Patience is a non-replaceable virtue in listening to God's voice, this period of waiting and listening simply cannot be rushed. As soon as God's guidance is received, a person's discernment is ready to move to confirmation.

The third step in this interactive procedure is confirmation. This is to make sure that the final choice is the leading of the Holy Spirit, not the result of being deceived by self or the evil spirit. A small group of four-to-five people may play a critical role in this step through listening, asking questions, and holding sacred place for one another. During this time, personal advice may not be suitable. It is expected that each person must make decisions on his own term. In addition, spiritual direction can be helpful in this process. Finally, this is the time to test the choice by using methods suggested in Chapter 4, and each person is free to choose methods that she resonates well with. It is important to keep in mind that God is not obliged to confirm a person's decision through signs or wonders.

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<sup>9</sup> Bieber, *Decision-making and Spiritual Discernment*, Location 1266.

Decision-making is not only about a decision, but also is a learning and growing opportunity that God offers to his people. To experience God's presence in a person's life in this process is equal to, if not more important than, the final decisions as the result of seeking God's guidance. Gallagher describes this experience of discernment:

Certainly, discernment is about attaining clarity in a specific choice. God, however, in calling us to the sometimes lengthy and laborious process of discernment, through it offers us a priceless and often life-changing opportunity for growth. Therefore, the discernment becomes a way of living the choice that emerged from the process. The grace of the discernment is not simply a clarity in the past, but a gift that shapes the entire living of the choice.<sup>10</sup>

### The Decision-making Flow Chart

In this section, the detailed procedure of seeking God's guidance is described in the proposed Interactive Model (see Figure 7 in Appendix A). This flow chart is designed as a step-by-step approach to provide clear guidelines for retreat participants. This does not mean that this model tends to be mechanical or provide a simple formula for the complex decision-making process.

This flow chart describes the general flow of steps in a decision-making process. First of all, the choices have to be identified: is this a relational issue, or a career choice, or a vocational discernment? It is important to know what the focus of this decision is, how many choices are available at the present time, and what is the desired outcome. After the very first step, a person moves to ask two questions about these choices. If this issue falls into God's intention in this person's life, one is free to proceed. It is much better to know a person's life orientation so that smaller choices related to this orientation

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<sup>10</sup> Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, Location 1587, 1687.



can be easily decided. If this is not clear, the person should rethink the central issue of the choice, “What would God want me to do in this life?” The second question is whether this choice is consistent with Scripture, ethical teachings of the Church, or personal conscience. If not, there is no point to move forward for decision-making.

After passing both questions, a person may examine the nature of choices: is this the choice between the good and the bad? In this case, it is obvious to choose the good. Are these all bad options that a person must choose between? Then this person should choose the one that is least evil. For example, a pregnant woman with a medical condition must choose between her life and the baby’s life. In this situation, both choices are bad, people usually choose to have mother’s life protected, which is less evil. If all options are good, it is time to move to the next step.

A retreat for discerning God’s guidance is primarily designed to make decisions among multiple good alternatives. Participants follow three interactive steps described above – preparation, reflection, and confirmation. During the time of prayer, a person is to discern the nature and the type of God’s guidance in his seeking process, because this determines how discernment proceeds in the next step. If God shows the choice through miracles or signs (Direct Encounter), there is no need to move forward. If God reveals the choice through overwhelming presence, the decision becomes obvious. But she has to confirm the decision. In most cases, God chooses the way of progressive leading or unnoticeable guidance to communicate his guidance. In such a case, a retreat becomes the best way to seek God’s guidance for a decision.

During the retreat, people may spend as much time as they need to prepare their heart in this seeking process. And then they reflect on God, self, and circumstance before

reaching a final decision. Afterwards a decision is to be confirmed through either testing methods, interacting with a spiritual director, or sharing in a small group. As soon as a decision is finally reached with much clarity and confidence in God's guidance received, it is time to celebrate God's providential grace for this decision.

### **Means of Discernment**

During this discerning process, participants learn how to approach God in prayer. Selected spiritual disciplines are going to be taught and practiced, and each person is free to choose from a list of methods that she feels comfortable with to practice. These disciplines include but are not limited to personal worship, meditation, contemplation, daily *examen*, the Scripture memorization, silence and solitude, Immanuel journaling, *Lectio Divina*, and spiritual direction. These disciplines will be taught and practiced through the six-week teaching period to prepare participants for their retreat-time exercises. However, only two of these disciplines are required and three of them are recommended during the two-day retreat.

### Silence and Solitude

Silence and solitude are two different disciplines, but often go hand-in-hand in practice to enhance the experience of God. Solitude is generally the most fundamental in the beginning of the spiritual life. Silence goes beyond solitude, and without it solitude has little effect.<sup>11</sup> Both disciplines fall into the category of the discipline of abstinence. Of

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<sup>11</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 160.

all the disciplines in this category, these two disciplines are complementary to each other. Therefore, silence and solitude are suggested to be together practiced.

In solitude, people purposely abstain from interaction with other people so that a personal being is moved into her inner center looking for God. Willard evaluates the relationship between the two disciplines: “In silence, our attention is directed to God alone, for we close off our souls from ‘sounds,’ whether noise, music or words.”<sup>12</sup> For Willard, silence is vital to make solitude real, so is solitude needed to make the discipline of silence complete.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, both disciplines are complementary and together bring powerful influence onto human body and soul. To have the desired experience of God, both disciplines are practiced during the retreat. This retreat is an ideal setting for participants to employ disciplines of silence and solitude and to discern God’s guidance, as silence allows people to hear the “still small voice” (1 Kgs 19:12) in which God speaks to the human heart.<sup>14</sup> Nouwen sees the importance of inner quietness: “A life without a lonely place, that is, a life without a quiet center, easily becomes destructive.”<sup>15</sup>

In combining silence and solitude in a retreat, people quickly realize the value of being with God. By removing the burden of relating with others, people make themselves totally available to God for an interactive dialogue and being attentive to God’s voice that speaks into the heart. Therefore, silence and solitude become the best marriage for people

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<sup>12</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of Disciplines*, 163.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, Location 1587, 1687.

<sup>15</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2004), Kindle Edition: Location 76.

to practice discerning God’s personal will. Just as Gallagher says, “Discernment may be and at times must be done without such times of retreat. Nonetheless, those faced with important discernments may profitably consider how to find spaces of silence in their daily lives, and whether some form of retreat – a day, a weekend, or several days – might assist their discernment.”<sup>16</sup>

### Immanuel Journaling

Journaling has always been an effective method in spiritual formation, however, Immanuel journaling introduces a simple method to improve a person’s awareness of God’s presence in her life through writing a letter to God and receiving God’s response in return as well. In the five steps, this method asks a person to imagine how God is relating with her: first, God can see this person; also, God can hear this person; God understands how this feels to this person; God is glad to be with this person; and finally, God can do something about what this person is going through. This is a powerful experience as one may look at her life from God’s perspective.

Immanuel journaling helps people “rhyme” their thoughts with God’s thoughts.<sup>17</sup> This letter can be shared in a small group setting, bringing a profound impact on the awareness of God’s activities in each person’s life. Instead of writing what people want to say to God and then wondering if he is listening or caring, this journaling encourages writing as though a person has already communicated her heart to God and is now

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<sup>16</sup> Gallagher, *Discerning the Will of God*, Location 758.

<sup>17</sup> E. James Wilder et al, *Joyful Journey: Listening to Immanuel* (East Peoria, IL: Shepherd’s House Inc., 2015), Kindle Edition: Location 76.

writing out his loving response. Through the conversational relationship with God, this person's perception of God, view of self, and of the world can be corrected, helping the person see the decision from God's point of view, apart from a distorted worldview.

One concern about this journaling is the fear that people might put their own words in God's mouth. Therefore, the authors of *Joyful Journey* explain:

One thing we would like to clarify is that when we write our impressions, we are not hearing and transcribing God's actual voice. In general, we enter a time of "thought rhyming/poetry" by creating a mutual-mind state with God. A mutual-mind state will shape our mind to see as God sees, but it can also reveal when our distorted poetry does not rhyme with God. We definitely do not want to limit the way God speaks to us, but for most of us (and most of the time) God's thoughts will arrive as an impression about his response to us.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile it is a greater temptation not to listen to God's voice in believers' life, "We know we are capable of misunderstanding what God might be saying to us, yet the greater danger arises from never attempting or desiring to understand what God might be saying to us to guide us."<sup>19</sup>

### Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction is not about advice giving or counseling. Counseling, most often, is temporary and problem-centered. In spiritual direction, no one intends to solve anything but only tries to detect the movements of God's Spirit in a person's life. For this reason, spiritual direction is part of a normal Christian life, and a spiritual director is the best person to guide the discernment of spiritual movement. Therefore, spiritual direction is to be given during the retreat to help participants discern divine guidance.

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<sup>18</sup> Wilder, *Joyful Journey*, Location 423.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Location 417.

Behind doctrinal correctness and theological traditions, church members are in fact desperately looking for God in their lives. Younger generations particularly are not satisfied with dogmatic teachings; they yearn to explore truth under spiritual guides and experience God in their personal lives. For this reason, spiritual direction can play a significant role in this interactive model.

Therefore, spiritual direction provides another viable route to assist Christians for the quest of discerning God's guidance. Christians know well the importance of having wise counsel or a spiritual guide in a decision-making process, but spiritual direction is naturally articulated to guide souls seeking her Creator, the Triune God. William Barry defines this discipline very well:

We define Christian spiritual direction, then, as help given by one believer to another that enable the latter pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, and to grow intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequence of the relationship. The focus of this type of spiritual direction is on experience, not ideas.<sup>20</sup>

It is the duty of a spiritual director to guide another looking for divine guidance in his spiritual journey as well as in daily life, so this director-directee relationship is not dispensable in discerning God's personal will.

### Personal Worship

Personal worship and scriptural meditation are the only two required disciplines to be practiced during the two-day retreat. In worship, people engage themselves with, dwell upon and express the greatness, beauty, and goodness of God through thought and

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<sup>20</sup> William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 8.

the use of words, rituals and symbols.<sup>21</sup> Personal worship, involving all five senses, can lead worshippers directly into the depth of their souls and quickly break down all the barriers for them to meet God. During worship, it is important to involve the body for the exaltation of God, since without the body people cannot be fully counted as human. Therefore, personal worship should involve the whole person – body, soul, and spirit.

The most critical part of this retreat experience is to continue turning attention to God. People are so obsessed with themselves that they are consistently occupied with their own issues. This is particularly true for a person who considers choices as he is so focused on making decisions that it is tempting to treat God not as God is. For this reason, personal worship continuously turns attention to Almighty God, and this becomes the focus during this retreat. Therefore, worship is God's centered focus and response of the inner man; it is being preoccupied with God.<sup>22</sup>

Although in this section spiritual disciplines are treated as means for discernment, personal worship also serves as an end of itself. Donald Whitney explains, "Worship is a spiritual discipline insofar as it is both an end and a mean. The worship of God is an end in itself because worship, as we defined it, is to focus on and respond to God. There is no higher goal than focusing on and responding to God. But worship is also a means in the sense that it is a means to godliness."<sup>23</sup> God expects his people to worship him publicly as well as privately, so he can bless them. Therefore, it is one of the greatest blessings in this

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<sup>21</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of Disciplines*, 177.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 1991), 88.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

age to have access to God's presence anywhere at any time. This is how God's people relate to him and immerse human mind and thoughts into the divine. By doing so, people come to know God as a person and undertake God's mind and thoughts through correlating with that of Christ.

### Meditation

The discipline of meditation is to turn a person's focus on the Word of God, or the life of Christ, because people are not supposed to focus solely on feelings or detachment or their mind's work on the decision. Christian meditation, as Richard Foster defines, is the ability to hear God's voice and obey his word.<sup>24</sup> In meditation, people give the inner space to the Word of God, this openness allows the Holy Spirit to nurture the soul with spiritual truth.

Meditation on the Word of God is one way, if not the primary way, to hear the voice of God. Through meditating, people are enabled to think as Christ thinks, and to do things as Christ does. God still speaks through the Word of God to his people in this age, and this is not a mystery but the biblical truth. During this retreat, participants experience God's grace in their searching of God's Word to meditate and to listen to what God may speak to them. In this process, the Holy Spirit may make use of the Word of God to transform both heart and mind, so people may see the truth in their decision-making situations. When the final decision is made, this experience confirms the truth revealed in the Bible and enriches people's spiritual life with many blessings.

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<sup>24</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 21.



## CHAPTER 7

### IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS AND EVALUATION

In this chapter, the HCI project is described according to the Interactive Model developed in previous chapters. The implementing plan is presented with all necessary arrangements for both teaching sessions and the retreat experience. In addition, a three-component assessment plan of this project is also articulated in this section. The results of this assessment are to be analyzed likely for further improvement so that this model may be applicable to more diversified Christian groups, or even for different faith groups in the future.

#### **The HCI Decision-making Project**

In this section, the Interactive Model is adapted for a fully designed HCI decision-making project and makes this model available to people on different levels of their faith journey. Some of this project's features are described in detail such as, two components of the project outlined as a six-week teaching and a two-day retreat. The combination of the teaching seminar and the experiential practice is intended to enhance the learning experience of seeking the knowledge of God and developing an intimate relationship with

God. It is expected that through participation each person finds God in her life in the process of decision-making.

### The Features of the HCI Project

There are several features of this project that are worthwhile to point out. First, this model is adapted to meet the need of HCI members. Each person comes to the HCI project with a need of seeking divine guidance for a specific decision in her life. However, each person is different in terms of her faith journey. Some are more mature in their daily walk with the Lord, some are relatively new to a church, and others may still be seeking the truth and learning about Christian faith. It is believed that God meets people where they are and is willing to guide whoever seek him for guidance, regardless of spiritual maturity. For this reason, this project takes the diversity of this group into consideration as the project is designed to let people meet with God in terms of spiritual progress.

Second, in this model no one will make decisions alone. A group of ten-to-fifteen people is chosen for this project, forming a faith community of mutual love and support in this journey of discernment. In addition, a small group of four-to-five people closely interact in a two-day retreat for sharing and listening. The small group will hold a sacred space, praying for God's wisdom and listening to God's voice for discernment. Supposedly there is no advice given in small group meetings, letting the Holy Spirit be the only voice heard in each person's heart.

Third, spiritual directors or guides are available in the process of discernment. In addition, each small group is assigned a spiritual leader to facilitate group discussion and

bring members together for praying and listening. Although this spiritual leader does not give any opinion of his own, he actually serves as a guide helping members in need of instructions, particularly for young believers and seekers. For this purpose, the HCI project designates one day for training group leaders prior to the retreat.

Finally, the HCI project is designed to keep a balance between biblical teachings and experiential practice, and thus this project is composed of a teaching seminar on seeking divine guidance and a retreat for participants to practice what they have learned in teaching sessions. The two components are complementary to each other, one is not complete without the other, for both knowledge and experience are equally valued in the decision-making process. Therefore, the human head and heart work together to discern God's guidance.

#### Seminar Outline

The HCI decision-making project begins with registration of interested members. Each member is informed about the details of this project and their expected commitment in the process. A consent form is required to be signed by each participant (see a sample document in Appendix C). An outline of a six-week teaching seminar is briefly described below, and the detailed teaching plan is attached in Appendix F.

**Week One: Fallacies of Divine Guidance.** The first week gives an overview of the HCI project, requirements for participating, and introduces two basic concepts in seeking divine guidance. First, God has a plan for each of his children. Second, God intends to communicate his plan so that God's people may live a holy life to please him. In addition,

some common errors, false beliefs and practices in seeking guidance are discussed and critiqued. Finally, members' concerns are to be addressed in this first session.

In addition, members are given a survey on decision-making (Appendix D) to complete in the first session. Participants are notified that there is no need to provide their personal information unless a person volunteers to reveal her identity in the survey. But they are encouraged to report their opinions as accurately as possible for the sake of evaluation, and the findings are to be summarized in the assessment section of this paper.

Week Two: Spiritual Disciplines and Practices. The second week introduces some spiritual disciplines for a discerning process. Some methods described in this paper are introduced, concepts and theological meanings are explained in this session. In addition, participants are encouraged to practice them throughout the seminar period. As a matter of fact, some practices are assigned starting in Week One; this gives sufficient time for members to become familiar with these disciplines. Two of the disciplines – personal worship and meditation are required to practice during the retreat. Participants are free to choose other disciplines that they resonate well with, but three of them are recommended to practice during the retreat: silence and solitude, Immanuel journaling, and spiritual direction. Moreover, spiritual lessons from desert dwellers, particularly the understanding of discernment, are introduced into the decision-making process. Finally, this session teaches Willard's three kingdoms and his contributions on hearing the voice of God since both ideas have become an integrated part of the interactive model.

Week Three: The Three Experiential Steps. This third week explains experiential steps in a discerning process: awareness, understanding, and action. This becomes a part of training for practicing spiritual disciplines. As participants discipline their body and

mind to move toward God, it is important to guide their practices for the goodness of the soul. Furthermore, spiritual consolation and spiritual desolation are introduced, since this session intends to help participants understand the inner compass and the deepest desire. In this week, participants are urged to practice Ignatian *examen* at least once each day. They are expected not only to learn theological implications of these concepts, but also learn to notice spiritual movements in their daily practice of spiritual disciplines.

Week Four: The Interactive Model (1). In this week, the new model is introduced, including concepts such as theological presuppositions, four kinds of God's guidance, six guidelines and six rules of discernment. Solid understanding of these concepts prepares members to effectively engage with spiritual exercises during the retreat, which may help them discern well in the process. It is important to remind participants of applying these concepts into their relationship with God in seeking divine guidance. It is anticipated that participants make good use of these practices in the process of seeking during the two-day retreat.

Week Five: The Interactive Model (2). In this week, more about the new model is communicated with participants, such as initiatives of the HCI project and its relevance to the decision-making practice. Any special features of this new model are to be discussed in this session. In addition, in each of the last five sessions, at least two cases studies are provided for group discussion, and participants may apply what they learn into the real-life situations.

Week Six: HCI Decision-making Project. This week introduces the HCI project and related concepts and procedures including three interactive steps – preparation, reflection, and confirmation. Then the Decision-making Flow Chart is explained to all

participants, so they may follow the procedure carefully during the upcoming retreat to discern God's guidance. Finally, any logistics of the HCI project, including preparations, schedules, and expectations are communicated with group members.

During the six-week teaching seminars, reading and practice assignment are given each week so that participants may acquire necessary knowledge and skills for their quest of seeking God's guidance. Although spiritual disciplines are introduced in the second week, the suggested exercises have been practiced along the way, so that each person may have first-hand experience at the time of the two-day retreat.

### Retreat Schedule

A two-day retreat is scheduled immediately after the six-week teaching sessions and below is the schedule for the retreat. An evaluation form (Appendix E) will be given to each participant at the end of the retreat. In addition, comments on the two-day retreat experience and decision-making is to be reported together with the evaluation.

#### Day One:

Session 1: Review and Teaching (Large Group)

Session 2: Practice: Preparation

Session 3: Share the Choices (Small Group)

Session 4: Practice: Reflection on God

#### Day Two:

Session 5: Review on the Procedure (Large Group)

Session 6: Practice: Reflection on Self and Circumstance

Session 7: Practice: Confirmation

Session 8: Share the Decision (Small Group/Large Group)

Each review session of a large group may take thirty minutes; the sharing sessions of a small group take one to one-and-a-half hours. Retreatants are encouraged to sign up for a spiritual direction session throughout the two-day retreat time.

## **Implementation of the HCI Project**

The HCI decision-making project should be completed in the time window of two months. The church must approve this project one month prior to the date of registration. A pastor or an elder is dedicated to overseeing the whole project until its completion. In addition, this project is announced to the congregation two weeks before registration. A retreat center is reserved at least a few months in advance, at the same time the teaching seminar is scheduled before submitting the proposal for the church board to approve.

### **Timeline**

The HCI Project starts with theological research on seeking divine guidance, which is presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this paper. This research is concluded in integrating three Christian spiritualities to propose a new decision-making model: The Interactive Model. This research took about one year to complete, finishing in Summer 2018. Therefore, based on this new model, the project is scheduled to launch September 2018, and expected to be completed two months later. Below is the schedule of the HCI decision-making project.

August 12, 2018: Registration & Project Team Meeting  
September 14, 2018: Seminar Week One (a survey is given this week)  
September 21, 2018: Seminar Week Two  
September 28, 2018: Seminar Week Three  
October 5, 2018: Seminar Week Four  
October 12, 2018: Seminar Week Five & Training of Small Group Leaders  
October 19, 2018: Seminar Week Six  
October 20-21, 2018: A Two-Day Retreat (an evaluation form is given at the end)  
October 26, 2018: Project Evaluation Meeting

## Personnel

As described, a pastor or an elder is assigned to oversee this project. In addition, two persons are recruited to assist administrative tasks such as registration, project planning, and coordinating with a retreat center, travel arrangement, room assignment, documentation, and group activities. The third person is a technical assistant, responsible for audio recording of lectures, videotaping of special events and photo taking throughout this event.

In addition, two spiritual directors are recruited to provide spiritual guidance for a group of ten-to-fifteen people during the retreat. Qualifications of a spiritual director: trained in a certificate program; experience of giving spiritual direction for at least two years; familiarity with the Interactive Model presented in this paper. Spiritual directors can be chosen among members of the church, or they may come from the outside as well. Preliminary screening is scheduled immediately after the church approves the project and the person in charge of the HCI project is responsible for the final selection of spiritual directors for the two-day retreat.

Finally, each small group is assigned with one group leader facilitating group discussion, guiding the group for mutual support and prayer, and taking care of their spiritual needs during the time of retreat. Qualifications of being a spiritual leader in small groups are: demonstrating spiritual maturity in Christian living and service; having proved experience in leadership and spiritual gifts in discernment; being familiar with the Interactive Model presented in this paper. A training session for small group leaders is provided one week prior to the scheduled retreat.



## Resources

A conference room is reserved for the six-week teaching seminar, a laptop and a projector are available in the church for this teaching arrangement. During the retreat, Holy Communion is to be given as the part of spiritual disciplines, so wine, bread as well as communion articles are available for such an occasion. In addition, other needed items such as a first aid kit, bottled water, pens, and notebooks for the retreat are to be prepared for the group ahead of time.

A handout of class notes is provided each week during the teaching sessions and a handbook is prepared for each of retreatants to guide their practice of disciplines in the retreat. In addition, a list of recommended books is available to all members to read and meditate during the time of seminar and retreat. These include: *The Spirit of Disciplines* by Dallas Willard, *Celebration of Spiritual Discipline* by Richard Foster, *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard, *Listening to God in Times of Choices* by Gordon Smith, *Discernment* by Henri Nouwen, *Out of Solitude* by Henri Nouwen, *A Beginner's Introduction to the Philokalia* by Anthony Coniaris, *Discerning the Will of God* by Timothy Gallagher, *Wise Choices* by Margaret Silf and *Joyful Journey* by James Wilder and Anna Kang.

## Requirements for Participants

The number of participants in the HCI project is limited to ten-to-fifteen people to assure the best quality of teaching and meaningful interactions among group members. In case, there are more than fifteen people showing interests, they are to be divided into two separate groups for teaching and retreat arrangement respectively. The ideal of this new model is to provide a sacred and safe place for each person to learn and practice spiritual

discernment. There are some requirements for participating this project: a member of HCI, or regularly attending HCI service or Bible study group; a person who has an important decision to make; a person who desires to seek God's guidance; and a person who is committed to a six-week seminar and a two-day retreat. It is made known to the church that spiritual maturity is not a requirement for Christians seeking God's guidance, and the HCI project does not demand being Christian as a condition to participate in a decision-making process.

Participants volunteer to join this project and must be willing to take time in preparing themselves for spiritual exercises. In addition to the required readings each week, they may be asked to read short articles on decision-making from a recommended list as well. And, spiritual disciplines are assigned each week to practice, so that they may become familiar with these exercises before the upcoming retreat. It is preferred that a more diverse group is recruited for this project to provide a better understanding of how this new model is received by people from different cultures, backgrounds, and age groups. However, this is a preference, not a requirement of the HCI project.

### **Effectiveness of the HCI Project**

The HCI project is designed as a pilot study to test the validity of this new model. For this purpose, this project intends to achieve five goals in guiding people to discern God's guidance in their decision-making. Therefore, in light of assessment of teaching as well as personal experience during the retreat, five goals have been targeted in the HCI project to promote wellbeing in the Body of Christ.

## Five Strategic Goals

The first goal is to provide learning and practicing opportunities for participants to grow in knowledge and faith as they are seeking God's guidance in a decision-making process, which is an important aspect of Christian living. Unfortunately, a local church usually does not teach well in seeking God's guidance. There are so many contradicting theories and methods, and as a result, Christians become confused about what to do in knowing God's guidance. For this reason, the Interactive Model intends to provide a comprehensive view of divine guidance for Christians to experience God's presence.

The second goal is to test the validity of theological assumptions in the Interactive Model. Most approaches in seeking divine guidance emphasize an intimate relationship with God. Though this is critical in seeking guidance, it may not be easy to measure. This model argues that a person's life orientation toward God is the decisive factor in seeking God's guidance. For this reason, the HCI project serves as a pilot study to verify this theological assumption.

The third goal is to help participants understand theological concepts and develop an appreciative attitude toward Christian traditions. It is important to explain the term "divine guidance" and understand spiritual discernment according to Christian traditions, because Christians are so confused in their practices of spiritual disciplines. Furthermore, in this new model three spiritualities are integrated into these guided practices in seeking God's guidance, so that people are not only shaped by doctrines but also by traditions and experience.

The fourth goal is to teach a biblical view in seeking guidance to avoid pitfalls and ill practices in seeking God's guidance. Some guidance-seeking practices become so

prevailing among Christians that Waltke even terms them as “manners of divination,” which should be forbidden among faithful believers.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, this project plans to help participants experience God’s presence, and to know God personally in the process, since the best way to discern God’s guidance is to learn from a person’s own experience.

The fifth goal is to make the Interactive Model available for a broader group of people, which may show that this model is adaptable for different Christian groups or denominations. It is universal for people to seek divine guidance in their daily decision-making. Therefore, the result of this study may facilitate dialogues among different faith groups and different traditions. In another word, this exercise may become a bridge to connect people from different traditions for a more constructive relationship to promote the common good of mankind.

In summary, five goals of the HCI project are all intended in this strategic planning and implementing process, and serve as standards in the process of assessment of this project. In the following section, three evaluation methods are proposed. This is so that the five goals are not only of use for this project, but also strategically evaluated in the HCI project for the future application as well.

### Three Evaluation Methods

There are three components in this evaluation of the HCI project. The first one is to administrate a survey on decision-making at the beginning of the teaching seminar. It intends to understand people’s position on the subject. Second, an evaluation is provided at the end of the retreat so that retreatants may reflect on their experience immediately to

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<sup>1</sup> Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 42.

report their personal experience of God. Third, an evaluation meeting is to be held when all feedback is received from participants. A final report is due two weeks after the retreat to assess the HCI project in term of its effectiveness and the future improvement.

### **A Survey on Decision-making**

This survey is provided in the first week of the teaching seminar to assess participants' views of seeking divine guidance and their decision-making practices. Instruction is given on how this survey should be conducted and their responses are meant to reflect their current views on these questions, not the teachings of HCI. One week is allowed to complete this survey, and the final opportunity to turn it in is the day before the scheduled retreat. A sample of this survey is listed in Appendix D.

### **An Evaluation Form of Retreat**

This evaluation form is provided to each participant at the end of retreat. This is not to evaluate the retreat service or project arrangement, but primarily to assess the effectiveness of the Interactive Model based on personal experience in discerning God's guidance during the retreat. They may choose not to identify themselves, but in the form, are asked to identify their age range, gender as well as stage of their spiritual journey for research purposes. A sample of this evaluation form is provided in Appendix E.

### **A Project Evaluation Meeting**

Within one week after the two-day retreat, a project leadership meeting is called to evaluate the HCI project. This is a comprehensive assessment of both teaching seminar and the retreat, and this evaluation includes, but is not limited to the content of teaching,

retreat experience, feedback on the proposed model, organizing skills and administrative service. A one-page report is due two weeks after the retreat to submit the evaluation result to church board.

It is expected that the HCI project serves as a pilot study for the Interactive Model, which can be adapted into different Christians groups to assist people in seeking God's guidance. As a result of the project, this model may be modified or improved based on feedback received and evaluations reported. It is possible that the study may not yield any decisive conclusions about this interactive model. Therefore, other research projects associated with a more diverse participants may become necessary to be carried out in the future to gather more information on application of this interactive model.

### **Final Assessment of the HCI Project**

The HCI project was carried out in September and October 2018. Eighteen people attended the seminar, which ran from September 14 to October 19, 2018; and fourteen of them registered for the retreat, which was scheduled on October 20 and 21, 2018 at Serra Retreat in Malibu, California. The following is a brief report of findings during the course of the HCI project.

#### **A Report of Project Findings**

A survey on decision-making was given in the first session of a six-week teaching seminar. This Chinese version of a survey was modified from Appendix D in this paper. Among participants, there was general agreement that God has a plan for his children and desires to communicate this plan to his people. It is noted that this consensus existed prior to teachings on the theological principles from this interactive decision-making model. In

addition, it shows that participants were eager to seek God's guidance in critical decisions and believed that God consistently reaches out and influences people's lives. However, there was little knowledge about how this process happens. Two-thirds of those surveyed expressed that decisions based on God's leading brings happiness in their lives, and most of them indicated that they knew some or very little about God's plan in their lives.

Among the eighteen people involved in this project, there were five males and thirteen females. Two were seniors (65+), five between the ages of 50 and 65, and the rest ranged from 21 to 35. Five participants were Gospel seekers, the remaining have been Christians for more than ten years. The diversity of this group creates some dynamic dialogue among group members during group discussions and case studies. Each person may benefit from another's point of view and life experience; therefore, this large group (ten-to-fifteen people) setting proves to be beneficial for group interactions in the project. In addition, participants are encouraged to be involved in a small group of four to five people for group discussion, co-listening, and moral support during the retreat.

At the end of the retreat, participants filled out the evaluation form to report their retreat experience. Everyone responded positively and said that they felt closer to God through the retreat. Two people reported that they came to good decisions, and two others stated that they still do not know how God is leading their decisions. The rest of the group said that they have made significant progress in the decision-making process. In addition, all participants learned how to discern God's guidance from this teaching seminar introducing the interactive model. They demonstrated further interests in studying this method and want to introduce this model to other people. The retreat allowed people to become more spiritually enriched when they came out of the encounter

with God. The seekers also reported an unforgettable experience to meet God in such an intimate setting during the retreat.

On October 26, 2018, the five people who planned this project held an evaluation meeting. Based on feedback received, both the teaching seminar and the retreat were meaningful exercises for the participants to develop a live relationship with God. Some participants reported still sensing God's presence even days after the retreat. For this reason, it is suggested to hold a similar retreat next year to continue the promotion of spiritual wellbeing for church members. Finally, it is recommended the next retreat have a more flexible schedule to fit with each person's spiritual need. In a word, the HCI project was an overall success in meeting its purpose.

#### Reflection on the HCI Project

In summary, this HCI project tests the validity of the interactive decision-making model. Although the number of people in this project is limited, its members were diverse in terms of age, gender, and spiritual maturity. A significant numbers of Gospel seekers participated in the HCI project, and their feedback confirms that the interactive model may be adaptable to those who are still seeking the truth.

In addition, it is critical to note the centrality of one's relationship with God in the interactive decision-making model. As people focus on their relationship with God rather than their decisions in the discerning process, divine guidance naturally flows out of a loving relationship between humans and God. The impact of this divine encounter may last beyond immediate guidance that people receive from God. This proved to be the case



of the HCI project as people enthusiastically reported their experiences with God in seeking divine guidance.

Moreover, people found that small-group sharing was quite helpful in the seeking process. During the teaching seminar, participants actively engaged group discussions of case studies, which reinforced their learning substantially. In this interactive model, any personal decision is made in the setting of a faith community, and each person benefits from other people's experience as well as their spiritual gifts. However, it is observed that trusting relationship among small group members becomes essential to the success of this interactive approach.

Finally, it is noted that this HCI project is a pilot study. Since the initial feedback is encouraging, further investigation is necessary to validate the claims of this interactive model and improve its methodology to guide many others in their seeking of guidance. It is hoped that this this model may be adaptable to Christians in different denominations, or even from different cultures.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper begins with a quest for finding a decision-making model applicable to people on different levels of their spiritual journey. The HCI decision-making project proves that this interactive model can be adapted for a wide range of Christians because it takes into consideration spiritual diversity to establish fundamentals in seeking God's guidance. The goal is not so much to know a decision, but to encounter God in knowing him and what he is doing in the person's life, and thus decision-making being just one part of the big picture that God intends for this world. For this reason, participants have achieved what they hope for through enriching their personal experience of God in the HCI decision-making project.

There are two basic convictions of the HCI project: God has a plan for each one of his children and desires them to know this plan and live out his blessings. Therefore, to seek God's guidance in decision-making is not an option for believers, but a command to love and seek God. However, this seeking does not equal divination (looking for signs) or second-guessing God's mind by adopting a simple formula or technique. Rather, this is based on a biblical revelation that God is willing to communicate his guidance through sharing his wisdom and his plan for a person's life. Built upon this conviction, this model is developed into its full capacity with discerning rules, guidelines, and principles.

In this paper, three decision-making models have been evaluated. Although these authors differ on several key points in doctrine of divine guidance, it is realized that their views are complementary instead of contradictory, and thus several of their agreements are noted. Therefore, the proposed model cannot be taken as another alternative, neither

is it a supplement to what have already been said in the literature. The Interactive Model intends to take considerations of different scenarios to understand God's guidance and to guide Christians in experiencing God according to their spiritual levels.

Three Christian spiritualities – Desert Spirituality, Ignatian Spirituality, and the thoughts of Dallas Willard have been introduced in this paper for their contributions on this subject. Their insights have been surveyed and integrated into an interactive model. For the desert dwellers, discernment is the center of their everyday lives, to discern is to live a life pleasing God. This reminds that each decision is just one piece of a puzzle that God is doing in a person's life. Therefore, it is important that decisions can be made in the context of people's orientation in this earthly life.

From Climacus to Ignatius and Willard, come observations of different ways of how God's guidance comes into a person's life. In light of their insights, four kinds of God's guidance are proposed in the Interactive Model, and these become fundamental to understandings God's interactions with his people. Based on Orthodox tradition, Muller and Wesley, six guidelines in seeking guidance are drawn to become guiding principles of this model. From the *Ignatian Exercises*, six rules of discernment are developed in this paper, which become a helpful tool in discerning spiritual movements in a person's mind and noticing God's leading through feelings and desires.

To seek divine guidance on a particular decision is necessary to understand God's will, which is simply defined as God's ability to cause things to happen. There are three aspects in the will of God, but these aspects should not be taken as separate, isolated or contradictory categories in the scope of God's will. To say that these three aspects are not different kinds of God's will is to emphasize their internal unity, and mutual correlation

to demonstrate who God is and what God is doing in this world. The three aspects of God's will are: the sovereign will of God, the moral will of God, and the personal will of God. It is the third aspect of God's will that is closely related to the concept of seeking divine guidance.

Based on biblical revelation and Evangelical understandings on divine guidance, this paper presents seven theological presuppositions on seeking guidance, which become the framework of the Interactive Model. One of conclusions from these principles is that God meets people where they are, no matter how little spiritual progress a person makes; as long as this person is seeking, God does not refuse to deliver his guidance. Therefore, those claims such as being a Christian as prerequisite in seeking God's guidance or being in an intimate relationship with God as necessity in approaching God, cannot stand. Since Jesus promises, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seek finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Mt 7:7-8) For this reason, the decisive factor in seeking divine guidance is not church membership, spiritual maturity, or a privilege of possessing biblical knowledge, rather a person's life orientation toward God.

Another important feature of this model is the combination of teaching sessions with a retreat experience. Biblical knowledge is necessary to guide a person's practice, and practice reinforces the knowledge of God through personal experience. In this model, teaching plays a critical role in guiding people to notice their feelings and desires, and practice becomes a natural extension of this learning process. Without discernment, no one is capable of knowing God's mind. Without spiritual disciplines, knowledge cannot

be transferred into a person's experience of God. Thus, it is essential for the success of this project that knowledge and experience work hand-in-hand, so that this seeking effort is not only for the sake of a decision, but a precious opportunity of spiritual growth and an experience of God's grace and presence in a person's life.

A distinctive feature of this model is that no one makes decision alone. A group of ten-to-fifteen Christians are organized for teaching sessions, and a small group of four-to-five people is interacting during the retreat, through praying, support, and encouragement in the process of seeking God's guidance. In this faith community, each person is free to share her decision so that a group of believers comes together, praying for guidance to be revealed to the person and removing any obstacles in the process. With the loving support of a faith community, such a person cannot be easily misled in a process of discernment. Nevertheless, this person still has to do her own work, and it is noted that the small group is not supposed to give advice in this seeking process.

The HCI project serves as a pilot study of the Interactive Model, showing that such a systematic approach is feasible in seeking God's guidance without compromising basic assumptions. A decision-making flow chart has proved to be quite helpful when participants prepare to move into prayer at the beginning of the retreat. It seems that this chart is not only applicable to the HCI project, but also to other relevant groups. For this reason, the flow chart seems universal in its nature, and can be further refined based on feedback received from retreatants. Other practical guidelines of this model may also be improved based on the results and the final evaluation of this pilot study.

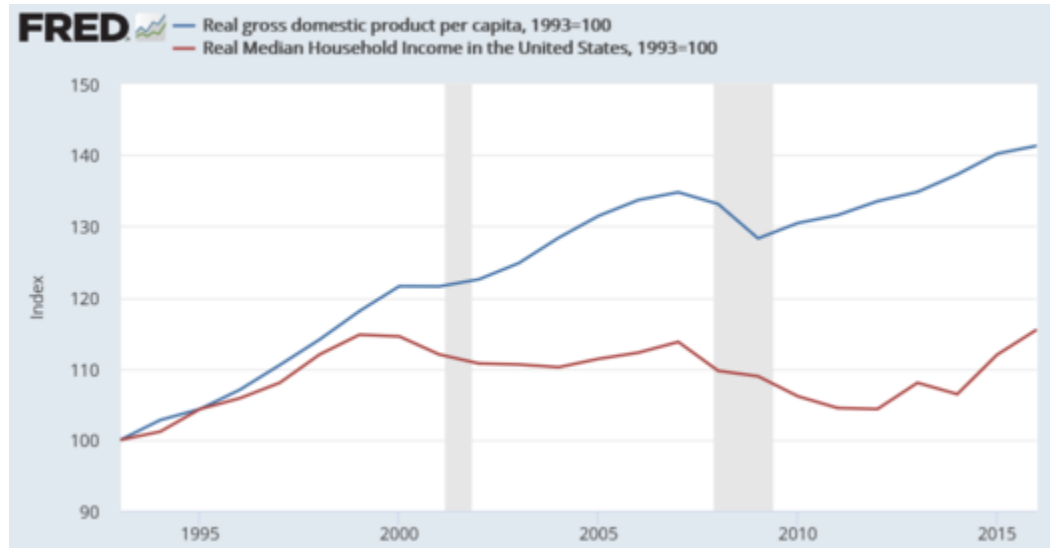
For the future projects, this model is recommended to be ministered among other groups of Christians for seeking God's guidance. While principles and guidelines in this

paper remain unchanged, other projects may further optimize in terms of content and format of teaching and retreat schedule. Two things stand out in this evaluation, the first is the tendency to make decisions prematurely during a two-day retreat. The second is the tendency of overdoing spiritual disciplines. Therefore, participants should be reminded of these dangers in the future, and it is wise to know how much disciplines are appropriate according to each person's ability and spiritual maturity.

In summary, based on Evangelical understandings of seeking divine guidance, the Interactive Model is developed through integrating Christian traditions over the course of thousands of years, and it is believed that the basic principles of this model are applicable to other Christian communities in discerning God's guidance. Therefore, future projects may adapt this model according to their own circumstances. Methods or techniques are subject to change, but theological principles of this interactive model may remain true in different settings. It is hoped that, through learning and seeking, God is glorified in his people's lives. Finally, it is the best to conclude this paper with one of God's promises in the Scripture: The man who does the will of God lives forever (1 Jn 2:17).

APPENDIX A  
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Median Household Income in the United States<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Neil Irwin, “You Can’t Feed a Family with G.D.P.,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/17/upshot/you-cant-feed-a-family-with-gdp.html>.

Figure 2: God's Will in the Blueprint Model<sup>2</sup>

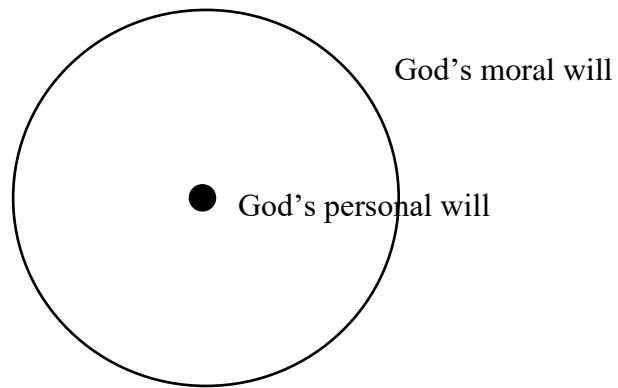
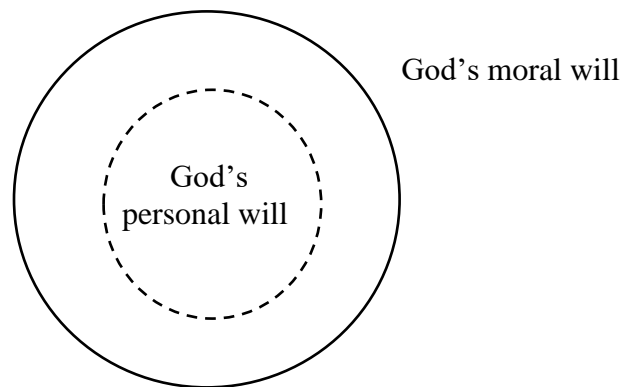


Figure 3: God's Will in the Wisdom Model<sup>3</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> Huffman, *How then Should we Choose?* Location 1316.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 1316.



Figure 4: God's Will in the Relationship Model

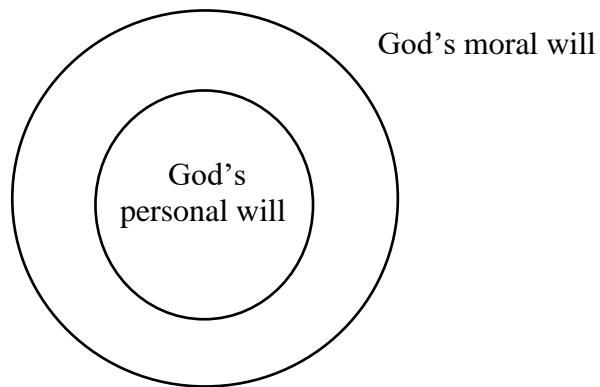


Figure 5: God's Will in the Interactive Model

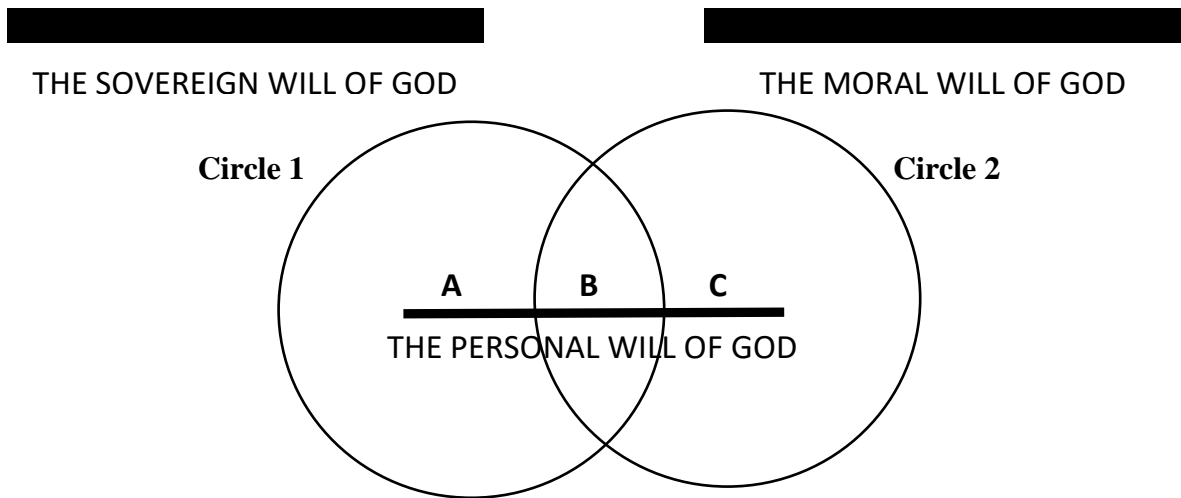


Figure 6: Four Kinds of God's Guidance

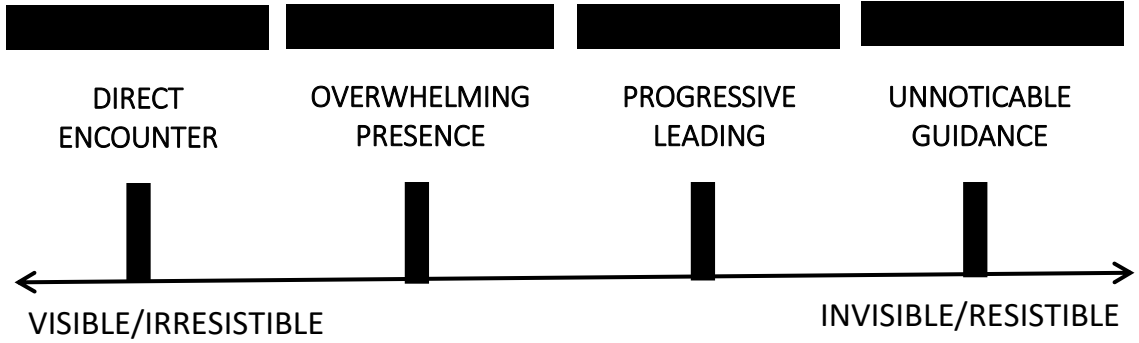
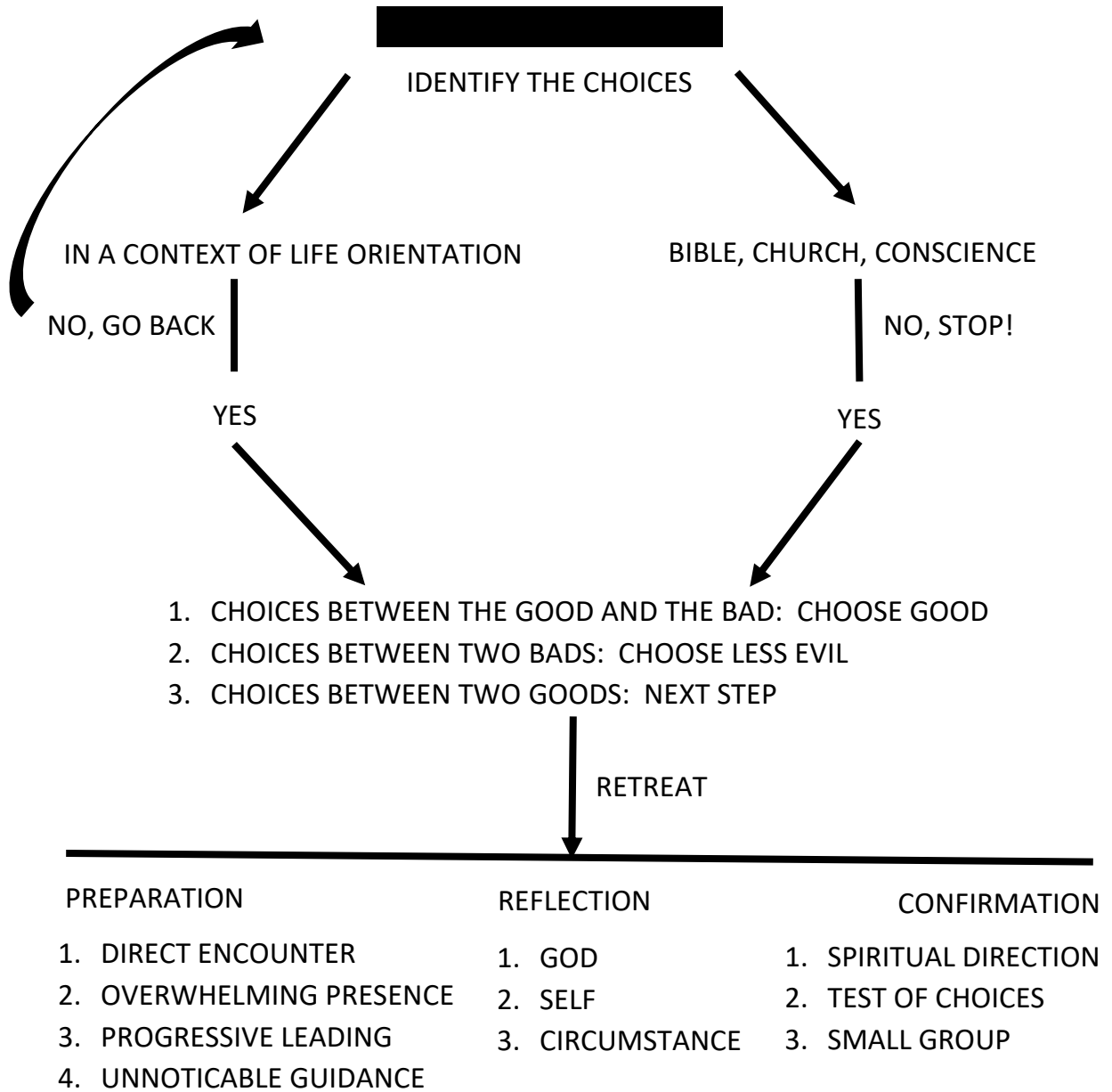


Figure 7: A Flow Chart of Decision-making Procedures



APPENDIX B

TABLES

Table 1: Population of California according to Ethnic Groups<sup>4</sup>

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
White	92%	89%	66.6%	57.2%	46.7%	40.1%
Hispanics			19.2%	25.8%	32.4%	37.6%
Black	5.6%	7.0%	7.7%	7.4%	6.4%	6.2%
Asian	2.0%	2.8%	5.3%	9.6%	10.9%	13%
AIAN*	0.2%	0.5%	0.9%	0.8%	1.0%	1.0%

\* American Indians and Alaska Natives

Table 2: Mean Household Income by Ethnicity<sup>5</sup>

Ethnic Category	Mean Household Income
Asian alone	\$90,752
White alone	\$79,340
Hispanic or Latino	\$54,644
Black	\$49,629

<sup>4</sup> US Census Bureau, "Population by Race and Hispanic or Latino Origin, for All Ages and for 18 Years and Over, for California: 2000," accessed August 10, 2018, *Census 2000 Redirecting Data*, [https://www.census.gov/census2000/pdf/ca\\_tab\\_1.PDF](https://www.census.gov/census2000/pdf/ca_tab_1.PDF).

<sup>5</sup> US Census Bureau, "US Census Bureau, Income Distribution to \$250,000 or More for Households: 2013," *Wikipedia*, August 10, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Household\\_income\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Household_income_in_the_United_States).

Table 3: The Inner Compass<sup>6</sup>

Where Is It?	It needs to be in the heart, and not the head.
How to Use It?	It needs practice – through prayers and reflections
Is It Steady?	Come to inner stillness, and God will show the movement of the heart.
Trust It or Not?	The heart shows the way. Don't get into arguments with the head.

Table 4: The Two Kingdoms<sup>7</sup>

Kingdom of Self	Kingdom of God
Ruled by self interest	Ruled by love
Grasping	Releasing
Willful	Willing
Independent	Interdependent
Determination	Transformation

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<sup>6</sup> Silf, *Landmarks*, 102

<sup>7</sup> Benner, *Desiring God's Will*, 43.

Table 5: Three Aspects of God's Will

	God's Sovereign Will	God's Moral Will	God's Personal Will
Scope of God's Will	God's Plan for Universe	God's Plan for Human Being	God's Plan for Individuals
Nature of God's Will	It is hidden (mostly)	It is revealed	It is to be discerned
Human Resistance	Irresistible	Resistible	Resistible
Consequences of Violation	Cannot be violated	Violation with Consequences	Violation without Consequences
Ultimate Purpose	God is Glorified	God is Honored	God is Pleased

Table 6: Four Kinds of God's Guidance

	God's Guidance	Our Response	Confirmation
Direct Encounter	Clarity beyond doubt, signs & wonders	Accept and act on it	NA
Overwhelming Presence	God's lovely presence	Respond to God's love	Yes
Progressive Leading	Through consolation and desolation, it is a process, step by step	Discern through feelings or desires	Yes
Unnoticeable Guidance	Through reasoning or imagining	Discern by listing pros & cons	Yes

Table 7: Four Kinds of God’s Guidance Viewed by Different Schools

Guidance Type	Dallas Willard	Ignatius	Evangelical Models
Direct Encounter	God Who Acts	First Time Election	The Blueprint Model
Overwhelming Presence	Sensing God’s Presence		
Progressive Leading	Conversational Relationship	Second Time Election	The Relationship Model
Unnoticeable Guidance	Blind Faith	Third Time Election	The Wisdom Model

Table 8: Guidelines in Seeking God’s Guidance

	Orthodoxy	George Muller	John Wesley	The Blackabys
Guideline #1	Conscience	Do not leave to feelings alone	Reason	
Guideline #2	Scripture	Seek according to the Word of God	Scripture	The Bible
Guideline #3	Ethical Rules of Church		Tradition	Church
Guideline #4	Spiritual Guide			Counsel
Guideline #5	Prayer	Ask for guidance in prayer	Experience	Prayer
Guideline #6	Purity of Heart	Heart that has no will of its own		
Guideline #7		Circumstance		Circumstance
Guideline #8		Confirmed with peace of mind		



## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM OF THE HCI PROJECT

TO: Participants, The HCI Decision-making Project

FROM: Jinchang Chen, Candidate of Doctor of Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary

#### **Description of the HCI Decision-making Project**

The purpose of this research is to develop an interactive decision-making model through integrating three Christian spiritualities. The HCI project is designed to apply this new model into a training program that guides participants for decision-makings in their daily life. I would like to invite you to participate in a pilot study, which consists of six-week teaching sessions and a two-day retreat scheduled from September 14 to October 21, 2018. You are encouraged not to miss any session of teachings and a two-day retreat, here is the list of your involvement in this project:

1. Agree to attend all sessions of teaching and a two-day retreat (exception granted upon request).
2. Agree to participate in-class discussion and after-class spiritual exercises.
3. Agree to participate in a group of sharing and support.
4. Agree to report truthfully on all the surveys or evaluation forms.
5. Agree to take a survey on decision-making practice and an evaluation form for a retreat experience. Please note that your identity and personal information in this project will be strictly kept confidential.

Participation in this project is voluntary. Anyone is free to withdraw at any time with a written request. All of your evaluation documents will then be destroyed and not used in the research.

If you agree to participate in the project, please fill out your name and sign below. Your participation is highly appreciated, Thank you!

I have read the description of the research which is to be undertaken for the HCI project as a part of the requirement for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Fuller Theological Seminary, and I agree voluntarily to participate in the proposed seminar and retreat, and the required assessments, evaluations, and practices as described above.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### A SURVEY ON DECISION-MAKING

Please answer each of the following questions according to your personal view, not the teachings of this seminar. You have one-week to complete this survey, and the last day to turn it in is the day before our retreat. Please note that the findings do not intend to judge your opinions, so there are no right or wrong answers. You are NOT obligated to identify yourself on this sheet.

1. Do you believe that God has a personal plan for your life?

- A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

2. Do you believe that God desires you to know his plan for your life?

- A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

3. Do you believe that God has a general plan or a detailed plan for your life?

- A. General Plan  
B. Detailed Plan  
C. Both Kinds  
D. Neither Kinds  
E. No Plan

4. Do you believe that God works interactively with you for his plan?

- A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

5. God confirms his guidance each time with a sign.

- A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

6. I believe God only speaks to me through the Scripture.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure
7. Do you believe that God's will is secret or revealed?
- A. Secret            B. Revealed    C. Both            D. Neither       E. Not Sure
8. Sometimes God speaks to me through a still, small voice.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure
9. It is a good practice to put out a fleece to confirm God's guidance.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure
10. In the Bible, God has already revealed everything I need to know in order to make wise decisions.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure
11. I believe that God opens or closes doors to lead me for an important decision.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure
12. The Bible does not tell us everything about our personal decisions.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure
13. God's sovereign will is the things that already happened or will happen.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure
14. God's moral will is the things that God desires to happen.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure
15. God's personal will is the things that God permits, desires, and wills to happen.
- A. Yes            B. No            C. Not Sure

16. Do you believe that God has a guidance for your specific decision?

A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

17. I have asked God for my decision before, and I clearly received his guidance.

A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

18. Do you believe that God always carries out his plan for you no matter what?

A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

19. My decision according to God's guidance means problem-free in my life.

A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

20. How much do you know God's plan for your life?

A. Nothing                  B. Little                  C. a Lot                  D. Some                  E. Never Ask

Please circle the answers to the following questions Yes or No

I attend church service regularly (3-4 times a month)                  Yes      No

I have a daily devotion time      Yes      No

I spend some time in prayer daily      Yes      No

I am a part of a small group or a Bible Study Group      Yes      No

APPENDIX E

AN EVALUATION FORM OF THE RETREAT

Please answer each of the following questions to describe your retreat experience. You are asked to identify your gender, age group, and stages on your faith journey for study purpose only, but you are NOT obligated to identify yourself on this form.

1. How do you describe your retreat experience?

A. Not Satisfied   B. Average   C. Good   D. Excellent

2. Do you reach a decision during this retreat?

A. Yes   B. No   C. Not Sure

3. Do you think that spiritual direction is helpful?

A. Yes   B. No   C. Somewhat   D. I did not schedule one

4. Do you think that the sharing in a small group is helpful?

A. Yes   B. No   C. Somewhat

5. What is the best part of this retreat?

A. Large Group   B. Small Group   C. Personal Time

6. Which spiritual disciplines do you engage in this retreat?

\_\_\_\_\_ Worship

\_\_\_\_\_ Meditation

\_\_\_\_\_ Silence and Solitude

\_\_\_\_\_ Scripture Memorization

\_\_\_\_\_ Contemplation

\_\_\_\_\_ Immanuel Journaling

- \_\_\_\_\_ Spiritual Direction
- \_\_\_\_\_ *Lectio Divina*
- \_\_\_\_\_ Others, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you distinguish the ways how God leads you for your decision?

- A. Direct Encounter
- B. Overwhelming Presence
- C. Progressive Leading
- D. Unnoticeable Guidance
- E. Not Sure

8. Please indicate which methods did you use before this retreat for a decision?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Pros/Cons
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prayer
- \_\_\_\_\_ Scripture
- \_\_\_\_\_ Counsel from others
- \_\_\_\_\_ Circumstances
- \_\_\_\_\_ Inner impression
- \_\_\_\_\_ Feelings, Emotional Movements
- \_\_\_\_\_ Open/Closed Doors
- \_\_\_\_\_ Miraculous signs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Intuition

9. Please indicate which methods do you use during this retreat for a decision?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Pros/Cons
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prayer

- \_\_\_\_\_ Scripture
- \_\_\_\_\_ Counsel from others
- \_\_\_\_\_ Circumstances
- \_\_\_\_\_ Inner impression
- \_\_\_\_\_ Feelings, Emotional Movements
- \_\_\_\_\_ Open/Closed Doors
- \_\_\_\_\_ Miraculous signs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Intuition

10. Do you confirm your decision during this retreat?

- A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Don't know what to do

11. Which method do you use to confirm your decision?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Spiritual Direction
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prayer
- \_\_\_\_\_ Scripture
- \_\_\_\_\_ Counsel from others
- \_\_\_\_\_ Small Group Sharing
- \_\_\_\_\_ One of Testing Methods, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

12. I believe that this interactive model works for me.

- A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

13. I am confident that I made the right decision during this retreat.

- A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

14. I would like to recommend this method to other people I know.

- A. Yes                      B. No                      C. Not Sure

15. How long have you been a Christian?

A. Not a believer B. Under 5 years C. 5-10 years D. 10+ years

16. How do you describe your Christian life?

A. Seeker B. New C. Devoted D. Mature

17. What is your age range?

A. 20-35 B. 35-50 C. 50-65 D. 65+

18. Are you male or female?

A. Male B. Female C. I do not want to answer.

19. Have you learned about decision-making practices before?

A. Yes B. No C. Not Sure

20. If yes, where and when?

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## APPENDIX F

### THE SIX-WEEK TEACHING OUTLINES

#### **Week One: Fallacies of Divine Guidance**

##### HCI Position on Divine Guidance:

1. God has a plan for each of his children.

Scriptural witness: Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah

God's being: his plan throughout human history

Historical witness: Evagrius, Ignatius of Loyola, Dallas Willard

2. God desires to make his plan known to his children.

God communicates through the Scripture.

God communicates through the Holy Spirit.

God communicates through prayer.

God communicates through voices, a still, small voice.

God communicates through the church.

God communicates through the circumstances.

##### Obstacles in Seeking God's Guidance

1. The focus of seeking guidance is God, not the problem.
2. Divination is not an option in seeking God's guidance.
3. Disposition of the heart is prerequisite for seeking God's guidance.

##### False Beliefs in Seeking God's Guidance:

1. It is all in the Bible.
2. God gives people a message for every turn in their lives.

3. Whatever comes is God's will.
4. God reveals his plan to special people only.
5. I am afraid of missing God's guidance in my life.
6. God guides my decision, so I am problem-free.
7. God's guidance comes with a sign.

## **Week Two: Spiritual Disciplines**

### Desert Spirituality:

Discernment in the biblical sense is the ability to discern matters and acquire a great understanding of them, the ability to distinguish between good and evil, and the capacity to know the will of God in this life.

### The Thoughts of Dallas Willard:

1. Three Kingdoms:
  - a. God's Kingdom
  - b. Self-kingdom
  - c. Satan's kingdom
2. Understanding God's voice:
  - a. Through circumstance, the impression of the Spirit, and the Scripture, people may confirm what God intends them to do.
  - b. Through quality, peacefulness of the Spirit, and content, a person comes to recognize God's voice.

### Means of Discernment:

1. Spiritual Disciplines
2. Personal Worship
3. Scriptural Meditation
4. Silence and Solitude
5. Immanuel Journaling
6. Spiritual Direction

## **Week Three: Three Experiential Steps**

### Ignatian Spirituality:

1. Spiritual Consolation:
2. Spiritual Desolation:
3. Daily Examen:
4. Inner Compass:
5. The Deepest Desire:
6. Test of Choices:
  - a. The Ripple Effect Test
  - b. The Pros and Cons Test
  - c. The Dry Run Test
  - d. The Death-Bed Test
  - e. The Advisor Test

### Three Experiential Steps:

1. Awareness:
2. Understanding:
3. Action:

## **Week Four: The Interactive Model (1)**

### Theological Presuppositions:

1. God has a plan for each his children, and he chooses to work out these details with them interactively.
2. Out of covenantal grace, God is willing to make his plan known to his people.
3. God is free to choose any ways to communicate with his children, through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, the faith community, spiritual counsels, and any other means he deems appropriate.
4. God desires an intimate relationship with his children, and he consistently invites them for daily walk with him.
5. Out of his divine love, he grants free will for humans to make their own choice.
6. God guides each person differently, even for the same person, he may lead him differently at different times.
7. Out of his sovereignty, he makes things work together for the goodness of his people, even at times they decide not to follow his guidance.

### Four Kinds of God's Guidance:

- (1) Direct Encounter
- (2) Overwhelming Presence
- (3) Progressive Leading
- (4) Unnoticeable Guidance

### Six Rules of Discernment:

- (1) Prepare the heart to meet God.

- (2) Choose in times of spiritual consolation.
- (3) Do not make a change of your decision in time of spiritual desolation.
- (4) Reject ideas and suggestions coming from spiritual desolation.
- (5) Not all the feeling of “peace” comes from God.
- (6) Not all ideas from spiritual consolation can be accepted without further examination.

## **Week Five: The Interactive Model (2)**

### Six Decision-making Guidelines:

- (1) According to the commands of the Scripture
- (2) According to the ethical teachings of the church
- (3) According to a person's own conscience
- (4) In the context of life orientation
- (5) Considering of providential circumstances
- (6) Consulting a spiritual guide or counsel.

### The Initiative of the HCI Project:

1. God meets people where they are.
2. God chooses to work interactively with his people in the process of seeking divine guidance.
3. God takes initiatives in providing guidance and makes it available for his children.
4. People's inability of receiving guidance comes from self-deception, or the influence of the evil spirit, or this world, definitely not from God.
5. It is a person's life orientation toward God makes a difference in seeking divine guidance.
6. It is in the setting of a faith community that each makes her own decision.

### Three Interactive Procedures:

1. Preparation: Disposition of a person's heart for receiving guidance.
2. Reflection: God, Self, and Circumstance.
3. Confirmation: in prayer, in spiritual direction, and in small group.

## **Week Six: The HCI Decision-making Project**

Features of the HCI Project:

1. The Interactive Decision-making Model is applicable to people in different stages of their faith journey.
2. No one is supposed to make decisions alone. For the HCI project, the teaching is done in a large group (ten to fifteen people); and a decision is made with support in a small group of four to five people.
3. It is indispensable to have at least one spiritual director alongside with each group for making decisions.
4. The combination of seminar and retreat intends to integrate the knowledge of God and personal experience in a decision-making process.

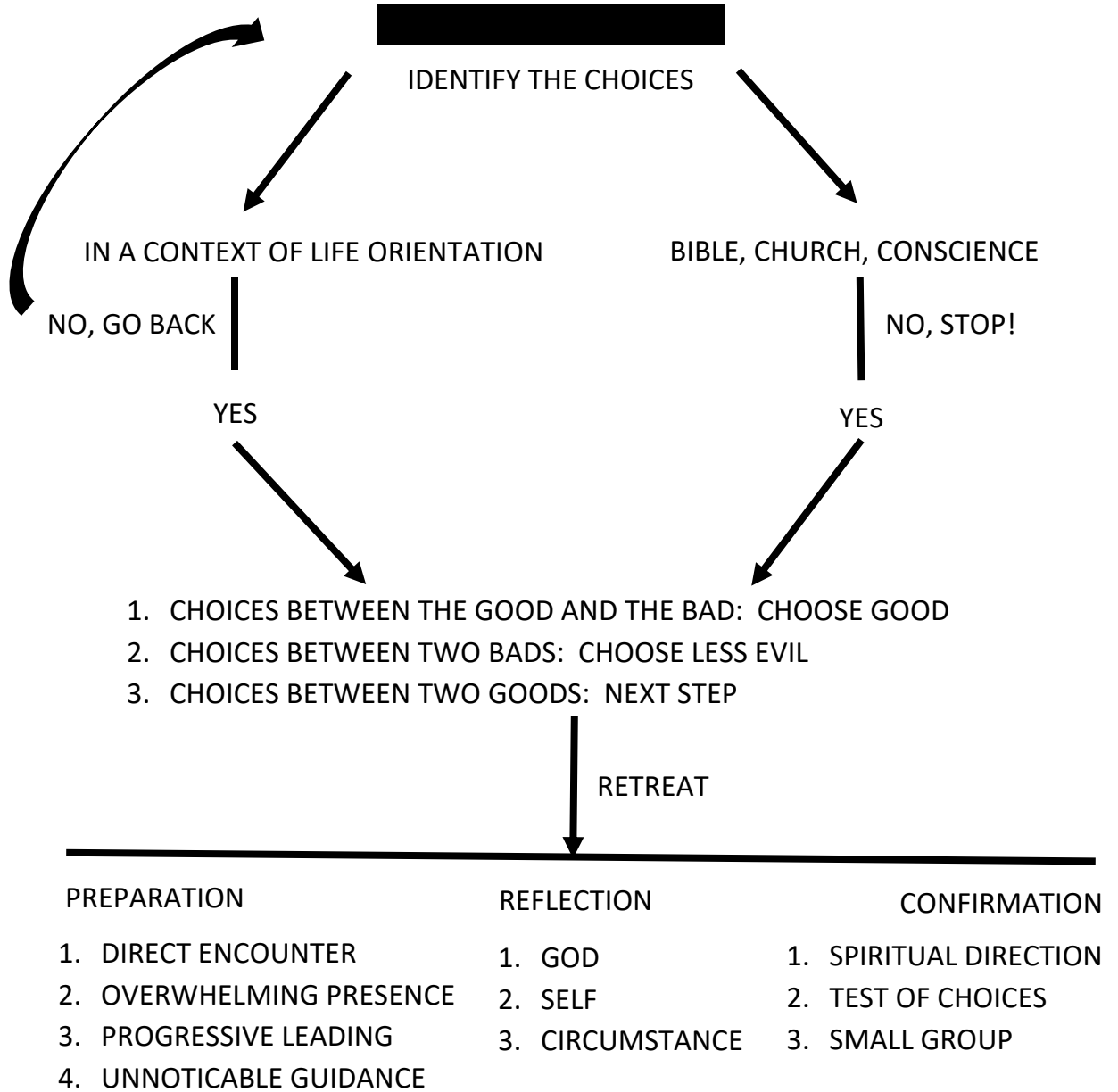
Decision-making Flow Chart (see next page)

1. Identify the choices.
2. Identify the types of choices.
3. Identify the kinds of encountering experience.
4. Preparation.
5. Reflection.
6. Confirmation.

Any Logistics for the two-day retreat



A Flow Chart of Decision-making Procedures:



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