

## LET THE CHURCH, BE THE CHURCH

### The Indefinite Nature of Confident Planning

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Dr. Charles Swindoll writes: “A lady received a brochure advertising a tour to Israel. Because going to the Holy Land was one of her lifelong dreams, she really wanted to go. She had the money, the time, the interest and the strength. But was it God’s will? Before going to bed, she read the pamphlet once more and noticed that the airplane they would be traveling on was a 747 jumbo jet. After spending a sleepless night wrestling with all the pros and cons, she was greatly relieved the following morning. She now knew it was God’s will for her to go. How did she know for sure? When she awoke and glanced at her digital clock, it read 7:47. That was her sign from God.”<sup>1</sup>

As silly as that should appear to us we are reminded by Paul in his letter to Ephesus, “*Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*” (Ephesians 5:17, ESV). Paul helps us do that by his example recorded in 1 Corinthians 16.

#### II. TEXT: 1 Corinthians 16:5–9 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup> I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, <sup>6</sup> and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. <sup>7</sup> For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. <sup>8</sup> But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, <sup>9</sup> for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

#### III. SERMON POINT: Following God’s guidance means planning with logical wisdom, “demonstrat[ing] great sensitivity to the Holy Spirit’s work, [being] flexible, ready to change [your] plans as the Lord direct[s] . . .”<sup>2</sup>

“As a complement to our earlier argument that not all of the so-called spiritual gifts in 12:1-14:42 are necessarily ‘spontaneous,’ but may include organization and planning (e.g., a gift of strategic insight, κυβένησις, 12:28), it is clear that Paul leaves room for an experience of divine ‘ordering’ of his plans when the time is right. Hence later the Corinthians over-readily criticize his readiness to change his plans as fickleness rather than as spiritual and pastoral sensitive to changing situations (cf: 2 Cor 1:17). Although he expects to move on to Jerusalem from Corinth, Paul leaves open the indefinite nature of the future by the construction of, οὐ ἔαν πορεύωμαι, **to go wherever I go next.**”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Swindoll, Charles R., Stress Fractures, Multnomah, Portland, OR, 1990, Page 232

<sup>2</sup> Pratt, R. L., Jr. (2000). [\*I & II Corinthians\*](#) (Vol. 7, p. 284). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Thiselton, Anthony C., The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A commentary on the Greek text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, Page 1329

IV. PAUL'S PLANS

"The difficulty of reconstructing precisely how many times Paul visited Corinth is widely recognized"<sup>4</sup> so we proceed with caution but with the best information available.

Paul has just come through the province of Galatia and has stopped at Ephesus. Paul is writing the Corinthians from his ministry base in Ephesus. Paul plans to go to Macedonia (It is in this province that the churches of Thessalonica, Philippi and Berea).

"The present διέρχομαι [dee-er-khom-ah-ee] has the force of 'imminent purpose' (Findlay), or 'firm intention' (Barrett), i.e. ***I plan to go through***."<sup>5</sup> "It has been several years since he has visited them, so at the moment he apparently plans to spend late spring and summer among them."<sup>6</sup> He sends Timothy on ahead, as sort of an advance party, through Macedonia and on to Corinth. At the same time Paul hears of issues in Corinth from visitors from that Church, so he writes 1 Corinthians.



At this time when he says that he plans to "pass through" Macedonia we mustn't insert our modern ideas of travel. This probably would mean a spending some important time with the Churches but Paul's goal is to "spend time" with the Corinthians. Notice how he couches his plans with the word "perhaps". Fee notes, "The sentences themselves reflect a straightforward desire, couched in terms of just enough uncertainty to preclude its being a promise."<sup>7</sup> Even his future plans after Corinth are couched in terms of "wherever I go"! "If he is there when winter sets in, he will stay with them because sea travel essentially shut down in mid-September."<sup>8</sup> One of his reasons for staying in Corinth is to they can equip him with what he needs so he can move on to the next leg of his journey. "The verb 'help me on my journey'<sup>52</sup> is a technical one for providing a person with food, money, and traveling companions so as to ensure a safe and successful arrival at their destination."<sup>9</sup> "Paul had previously refused payment while laboring in Corinth, and this refusal had been the

<sup>4</sup> Thiselton, Anthony C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A commentary on the Greek text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, Page 1327

<sup>5</sup> Thiselton, Anthony C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A commentary on the Greek text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, Page 1328

<sup>6</sup> Fee, G. D. (2014). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (N. B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, G. D. Fee, & J. B. Green, Eds.) (Revised Edition, p. 904). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, G. D. (2014). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (N. B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, G. D. Fee, & J. B. Green, Eds.) (Revised Edition, p. 905). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>8</sup> Garland, D. E. (2003). *1 Corinthians* (p. 757). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

<sup>52</sup> Gk. προπέμπω; it appears again in v. 11. It is found in the NT with this meaning in 2 Cor. 1:16; Rom. 15:24; Tit. 3:13; Acts 15:3; 3 John 6. Outside the NT cf. 1 Macc. 12:4; 1 Esdr. 4:47; see also the entry in MM.

<sup>9</sup> Fee, G. D. (2014). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (N. B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, G. D. Fee, & J. B. Green, Eds.) (Revised Edition, p. 905). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

source of dissension among them.”<sup>10</sup> This change of policy indicates that Paul was optimistic that this letter to Corinth would be effective in healing the divisions among them.

Of course all of this is, “If the Lord permits.” He will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost and then commence this journey. If he is thinking of “Pentecost” as a season more than a celebration (These were Gentile churches “it does not necessarily imply that he and the churches kept this feast.”<sup>11</sup>), this probably means that “Paul intends to start his travels when summer arrives.”<sup>12</sup> Paul’s plans to stay in Ephesus involve more than just waiting for a convenient time to travel but because of great ministry opportunities. “*For a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.*” (1 Corinthians 16:9, ESV). Here we note that “hostility, however, is no hindrance to the spread of the gospel (Phil. 1:12–14): ‘Evangelism flourishes under fierce opposition’ (Findlay 1910: 948).”<sup>13</sup> “His reasoning provides a valuable lesson for those seeking to determine the will of God in a ministry situation.”<sup>14</sup>

PS: (!) Now here is an interesting note that we find later in the New Testament: this didn’t happen quite this way. “Paul’s plans were altered. Timothy, sent on ahead to Corinth before the completion of the letter (cf. 4:17, and the verses in the following section), had evidently succeeded in his mission of reminding the congregation of Paul’s “ways in Christ,” for which reason the apostle drew up another, second itinerary. He would sail directly for Corinth, from there traveling north to Macedonia, would drop down to Corinth again, from there embarking for Jerusalem (cf. 2 Cor. 1:15–16). This second plan, much more to the Corinthians’ taste, was not carried out, as is clear from their reproaching Paul for vacillation (cf. 2 Cor. 1:12ff.). The reason lay in the altered situation at Corinth, mirrored in “Second” Corinthians. To that situation, Paul first responded by letter (2 Cor. 2:14–6:13 and 7:2–4?), then by a visit which ended disastrously (cf. 2 Cor. 7:12). Paul then returned to Ephesus, penned yet another letter to Corinth (the letter of tears referred to in 2 Cor. 2:4; 2 Corinthians 10–13?) which eventuated in a reconciliation reported to him by Titus (cf. 2 Cor. 7:6f.), a report for which Paul was too impatient to wait at Ephesus, and so met Titus half-way at Macedonia (2 Cor. 2:12–13).”<sup>15</sup>

In the end, Paul “went from Corinth to Macedonia and thence back to Ephesus (2Cor 2:12-13).”<sup>16</sup>

## V. THE PAULINE APPROACH TO DIVINE GUIDANCE

One of the most comprehensive and arguably the best contemporary book written on decision-making and God’s will is co-authored by Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, titled: *Decision-Making & The Will*

<sup>10</sup> Pratt, R. L., Jr. (2000). *I & II Corinthians* (Vol. 7, p. 284). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>11</sup> Fee, G. D. (2014). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (N. B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, G. D. Fee, & J. B. Green, Eds.) (Revised Edition, p. 906). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>12</sup> Garland, D. E. (2003). *1 Corinthians* (p. 758). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

<sup>13</sup> Garland, D. E. (2003). *1 Corinthians* (p. 758). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

<sup>14</sup> Pratt, R. L., Jr. (2000). *I & II Corinthians* (Vol. 7, p. 284). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>15</sup> Harrisville, R. A. (1987). *1 Corinthians* (pp. 287–288). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

<sup>16</sup> Thiselton, Anthony C., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A commentary on the Greek text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, Page 1327

of God. In it they argue for and expand what we see clearly identified in this passage: **Christian decision-making is normally accomplished by wise and strategic planning, with humble acceptance that a loving and sovereign God will order and amend your plans as necessary.** We see this clearly in this passage. In summary<sup>17</sup> we see:

1. **PURPOSES:** Paul adopted spiritual goals that were based upon God's clearly revealed will. I'm sure Paul was praying as he prayed for the Thessalonians: *"To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power,"* (2 Thessalonians 1:11, ESV)
2. **PRIORITIES:** Some things were uncertain, but based upon what he knew he arranged his plans by priority, determining what should be done first, second, third etc. Is it not true that *"if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."* (James 1:5, ESV)
3. **PLANS:** Paul's plans then gave him a "proposed" agenda and a strategy for accomplishing the purposes. One might hope that Paul would rest in the promise: *"Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act."* (Psalm 37:5, ESV)
4. **PROVIDENCE OF GOD:** Paul clearly placed himself and his plans in submission to the sovereignty of God. This passage clearly identifies itself with James' counsel: *"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."* (James 4:13–16, ESV)

## VI. **CONCLUSION**

This passage does not say all that needs to be said about Divine Guidance, but this is a good place to start. We must remember that God, in His grace, has given us ample instruction in God's Word to provide moral guidance for His Church. He has also given us His Holy Spirit to work in us *"... both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* (Philippians 2:13, ESV). He has promised wisdom to us who ask in faith; and He has given us godly brothers and sisters to help us; and most of all we can trust Him -- *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."* (Proverbs 3:5–6, ESV).

### **Recommended Resources:**

1. Friesen, Garry with J. Robin Maxson , 'Decision-Making & the Will of God', Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, 1980 ([Amazon.ca](https://www.amazon.ca/dp/0920281110))

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<sup>17</sup> Adapted from 'Decision-Making & the Will of God', Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson, Multnomah Press, Portland, OR, 1980, Page 239.

2. MacArthur, John, 'Found: God's Will', David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, CO, 2012 (or listen to a message with similar content; 'Taking the Mystery Out of Knowing God's Will By John MacArthur' on [YouTube](#)).