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**A Biblical Theology for Knowing God’s Will [GM16]**

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**Popular Views for Knowing God’s Will: Weighed and Found Wanting**

**Introduction:**

There are as many views of “knowing God’s will” as there are books on the subject! The body of literature, however, will usually fall into a few major paradigms. While we cannot represent all of the options, a recent volume published by Kregel, *How Then Should We Choose? Three Views on God’s Will and Decision Making* (2009), which include Blackaby, Smith and Friesen, claims that their choices “represent the three main schools of thought on God’s will toward which modern writers on the topic tend to gravitate or upon which they depend for various nuanced mediating positions” (p. 14). These three views are drawn from Blackaby, Smith and Friesen. The value of this views books is that each author responds to the others...so you get a conversation between the three views. Meadors disagrees with the editor’s claim that these three views are the “best” options. Meadors also claims that his view is NOT a variation of Friesen but it a different option to the other views.

Our purpose in this lecture is to survey these three views. Because of the volume of material, you should choose to read and compare the publications of these three and Meadors for making your judgments.

**I. Henry and Richard Blackaby…Rampant Subjectivism**

In addition to the chapter in the Kregel volume by Henry’s son Richard, the foundational publication for this view is: Blackaby, Henry T. and King, Claude V. *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994. The Blackaby clan comes from Southern Baptist traditions with a Canadian twist.

A. Some Central Assumptions of the Blackaby Model

1. “The core belief of this perspective is that God not only has a specific will for individuals but also communicates that will to people so they can follow it.” (*Three Views*, 33). “You do not discover God’s will. God reveals it to you out of the intimacy of your walk with Him.” (*Three Views,* p. 85) But it is still the believer’s responsibility to find God’s will within their “walk.”

2. In consort with the core belief, the believer must learn to recognize the direct voice of God that communicates God’s will to them.

3. “God’s voice” comes in many ways, but we must learn to hear when God “speaks.”

4. The experiential side of life is the door to knowing God and his will (*Experiencing God*, p. 4, Review and evaluate the list).

5. The vocabulary of the Bible is a springboard to enhancing your experiential side (*Experiencing God*, pp. 12-14).

6. Every text is the Bible that addresses knowing God and his will is immediately a model for us to follow. There are no contextual boundaries but total continuity of meaning/application from then to now.

7. The Holy Spirit currently does a work of “revealing” God and his will (*Experiencing God*, ch. 11).

8. Knowing the character of God helps to distinguish/recognize the voice of God. (*Three Views*, p. 39)

B. Critique of the Blackaby Model

1. The Blackaby clan demeans the rational for the experiential while never asking the question about how to decide whether their experiential-reasoning is really God or just their own interpretation of experience.

2. The Bible is given full lip service, but the process of understanding texts is purely subjective/experiential rather than contextual-hermeneutical analysis of the original intended meaning of a text.

3. Biblical texts and stories are utilized in a cavalier manner and become proof-texts to support our own experiential views. Blackaby’s composition lacks evidence of “professional” biblical awareness. Theological and exegetical consciousness is foreign to Blackaby. In fact, being a happy pastor may require rejecting such rational requirements.

4. Their system is captive to internal “voices” and does not provide a reasoned critique of their self-authenticating-experiential assertions. They affirm “when God speaks to people today, He is not providing new revelation or writing an addendum to Scripture; He is applying His Word to the particulars of our lives.” (*Three Views*, p. 38). But the application of the Word they illustrate is proof-text rather than context based. This promotes the Bible as the dummy in the hands of a ventriloquist.

5. The act of “revelation” is assumed and subjectively validated without an adequate theological evaluation of this domain. They insist that the Holy Spirit is using the Word, but their illustrations demonstrate no responsible process of interpreting Scripture but rather a “word association” from texts to our experience with the assumption that it is a direct work of the Spirit.

6. There is an old dictum; “A person with an experience is never at the mercy of a person with an argument!” How would you evaluate this dictum?

**II. Gordon Smith…Reasoned Subjectivism**

Gordon Smith’s primary publication on this subject is: Smith, Gordon T. *Listening to God In Times of Choice: The Art of Discerning God’s Will*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Gordon Smith’s career has been in Wesleyan and Christian Missionary Alliance traditions.

A. Some Central Assumptions of the Smith Model

1. We are created in the image of God with the resulting capacity to choose courses of action. God allows the nature of his creation to operate without micro-managing it by an imposing direct process. Our relationship with God and the community creates a matrix for decision-making. (*Three Views*, 175-178)

2. Smith rejects a “blueprint” view of finding a specific will in order to make a decision. Rather, he promotes a “friendship with God” [relationship] model. Good choices are the result of a good relationship with God in our daily walk as defined by Scripture. Smith reflects appropriately upon the tension of how sin affects the human process while recognizing that we still must make choices. Discernment is an “art” resulting from relationship. “We discern as well as we live, and we live as well as we discern.” (*Listening*, p. 21)

3. Decision making is best pursued from a context of “a union with Christ that is so intimate as to necessitate divine participation in our decision making.” [*Three Views*, 181) Smith reasons about how intimacy with God as directed by biblical understandings assists our decision-making. To a novice reader, it may seem that Blackaby and Smith are similar. This similarity is more surface than reality. Smith writes from an articulate theological grid; Blackaby lacks this grid and writes exclusively from an experiential grid that bends Scripture to serve its purposes. Consequently, even if one does not agree with Smith, there are reasons to respect his “reasoned subjectivism.” Smith himself is also very guarded in his assertions about subjective perceptions. [See p. 187 of *Three Views*]

4. Out of the above contexts, Smith affirms that God “speaks,” but this speech is subtle and complex. Smith avoids a naïve assertion about hearing God’s speech. He affirms that “discernment is a critical reflection in faith and humility that enables us to more fully be disciples….” (*Listening*, 25). Discerning God’s voice requires critical thinking and one must guard against assuming “voices” are automatically authoritative.

5. Smith cautiously affirms a Wesleyan type view of the witness and prompting of the Spirit. Smith affirms “the subjective witness of the Spirit must be balanced by the objective witness of the Spirit through Scripture and in the church.” (*Listening*, p, 47)

6. Smith cautions against using the Bible’s texts and stories as normative guidance clips. Such practices can abuse Scripture by forcing it into our own perceptions.

B. Critique of the Smith Model

1. Reading Smith immediately impresses one that careful theological reflection has taken place. Smith’s model is reasoned subjectivism based on a relational-growth model guided by godly living. Smith does not insist on some “specific will” that must be found. He does, however, affirm an internal guidance process.

2. It is good that Smith starts with the analogy of being created in God’s image and what that means for managing our world.

3. Smith’s subjectivism is clear but cautious.

4. Smith’s view of the witness and promptings of the Spirit were reviewed in my lecture on the Spirit.

5. Smith is much more judicious than Blackaby in regard to how sin has affected human processes and in regard to what role the Bible plays in decision making.

**III. Garry Friesen…Christian Pragmatism**

Garry Friesen’s popular book, *Decision Making & the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Multnomah Press, 1980; Revised 2004), was birthed from Friesen’s 1978 Th.D. dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary. Friesen’s dissertation was primarily a critique of the will of God tradition originating from the Keswick movement in the United States. Friesen’s focus, therefore, was far too narrow to represent the broader theological traditions (e.g. the whole Reformed mindset is missing as well as Charistmatics and Arminians). To call what he critiques the “Traditional View” is an over reach. However, because the subjectivism of the Keswick movement had infected many of the independent church traditions in the U.S.A., Friesen’s more objective analysis was an appropriate bombshell to their assumptions. Many Baptist, and independent Bible Church traditions in the U.S.A. naively adopted subjective assumptions that were prevalent. During 1979-1983 I taught in a Baptist school in the South and used Friesen’s book as a segment in my Christian ethics class...I was nearly fired because of alumni uproar about my using Friesen’s book!! (read the first 100 pages of the original edition to get a feeling for the subjectivism of the period). I judge the volume as doing a great job in deconstructing a targeted subjectivism. However, Friesen and Meadors have very different models to evaluate the what and how of God’s will.

A. Central Assumptions of the Friesen Model

1. There is no “specific will” of God that needs to be discovered in order to make a decision. Decision-making is a matter of freedom within biblically defined boundaries (moral will).

2. Friesen summarizes his view in four principles (*Three Views*, 102):

* Where God commands, we must obey.
* Where there is no command, God gives us freedom (and responsibility/1) to choose.
* Where there is no command, God gives (/2) us wisdom to choose.
* When we have chosen what is moral and wise (/3), we must trust (/4) the sovereign God to work all the details together for good.

NOTES : 1. How do we enact “responsibility?

2. What does “give” mean? How do you know? Assumed?

3. “Wise” is neither biblically or philosophically defined

4, “Trust” requires objective analysis to determine its

appropriateness beyond pure subjective assumptions.

B. Critique of the Friesen Model

1. There are some points of agreement between Friesen and myself. How we arrive at our conclusions, however, has marked differences.

2. Friesen often lives in a small world…a rather truncated view of the subject of God’s will (e.g. an American Keswick view is hardly worthy of the title “traditional,” which implies a broad-based view. While dominant in certain “independent” groups, many American denominations are not represented).

3. A critique of Friesen may be more about what he does not say as what he does. For example, he does not adequately define or address a number of crucial areas that he claims as pertinent to his model. For example,

* Friesen has endeavored to copyright the term “wisdom” (see his website), but he never really unpacks wisdom as a biblical or philosophical construct, he merely asserts it, “do the wise thing” (he gives a list of for the “way of wisdom” on p. 266, but it only yields pragmatism).
* Friesen says “do the wise thing” ... but how does that happen? A close look at Friesen reveals that a new subjectivism is born (the 2nd edition is even more so).
* While Friesen notes God’s sovereign will, he does not adequately connect this with the concept of God’s providence and how this interfaces with the idea of “freedom.”
* While Friesen’s insistence on freedom has merit, the idea of freedom in terms of its nature and extent needs more critical thinking. He does not address how the human “nature” can function when tainted by sin.
* Friesen does not provide a rational model for moving beyond the Bible to decisions. If/when the Bible is silent, is the decision maker totally free to choose? To say “yes” is naïve. The issue of how a worldview and values model functions is absent. He does not reflect an awareness of philosophy and ethics and how it informs the process of Christian thinking.

4. Ironically, when Friesen comes to the core of his theory, “wisdom” as the modus operandi of decision-making, he reverts to a form of subjectivism! His third principle is “Where there is no command, *God gives us wisdom to choose*” [emphasis mine]. And just how does this happen? In his second edition he is much more subjective about this than in the original version.

**Conclusions Concerning the Three Views:**

The Blackaby model, like its pietistic predecessors, is well-meaning but inadequate, even flawed. This model jumps from a set of assumptions to a less-than-professional-theological model of how God operates. The Bible is abused at nearly every level. The Blackaby model thinks it is honoring God when it is actually undermining sound biblical theology. Smith lessens the impact of subjectivism immensely. His writing also honestly exposes the struggle of subjectivism. How does one operate authoritatively without absolute certainty at the human level? Friesen moves the discussion in good directions but falls short in actually providing a model that can **demonstrate lines-of-reason from questions to solutions**. His treatment of wisdom ends up being as subjective as the views he criticizes. Other observations about these views include:

1. The effect of the Fall and the resulting “darkening” of the mind are not adequately factored into the thinking process. How is the noetic effect of the Fall addressed?

2. Scripture is utilized in a “concept of doctrine” (= turning our concepts into doctrine), proof-text, manner rather than in a critical thinking, exegetical context manner. The various views well illustrate how starting theological assumptions manage the data of the Bible rather than letting the Bible manage our concepts.

3. In the subjective traditions, Scripture is too small.

4. Friesen’s criticisms of the subjective traditions are well founded but his own insights into how Scripture guides are short sighted (philosophically, theologically and exegetically). At points, Friesen himself reverts to subjectivism because his model does not provide a paradigm for critical worldview thinking.

5. The *Three Views* volume actually only represents a small part of the religious traditions that engage the question of God’s will. The representatives are either from an Arminian/Keswick type background (Blackaby and Smith) or writing in reaction to those traditions (Friesen). There is no representative from the Reformed traditions, Weslyan Quadralaterial, nor Charismatic traditions present. Nor is the concept of Romans 12:1-2 and a resulting biblical worldview and values system present. Consequently, major theological voices are missing in this views book.

If we are left to these three options alone, we lack a full biblical paradigm to adjudicate the serious decisions of life. We may make some good decisions from any of the three, but if these views were challenged to answer serious worldview issues, they might ‘sense’ a good answer but their models could not argue their answers in the market place of ideas.

**IV. Meadors’ Worldview and Values Model**

1. Dr. Meadors has endeavored to lay out a biblical, philosophical, and ethical model by which the Church has processed decisions, especially when there is no DIRECT teaching from the Bible.
2. Meadors’ model lays out paradigms for reading Bible translations and ordering issues in relation to “how” the Bible teaches: Direct, Implied and Creative Constructs. These paradigms lead us through a biblical analysis of issues we encounter.
3. Believers typically need to make many decisions “beyond” the direct teaching of Scripture. They are “free” to do so. BUT that freedom is not “do what you think is appropriate.” Rather, it is bounded by accounting for the Fall, how our thinking is affected by many factors (e.g. the Christian group we join and our theological presuppositions), how our “freedom” is related to our “nature.” We must **have “lines of reason”** that explain why we are making the decision. Furthermore, the lenses of various theological models heavily affect conclusions.
4. Wisdom in the Bible is a unique literary genre. Much of it is a product of a biblical mindset while not quoting Scripture (e.g. Proverbs and other Wisdom genre do not quote the Torah but reflect its teaching in Wisdom teaching). Biblical wisdom is a product of being saturated with a biblical worldview and values mindset. Wisdom is actually a form of knowledge in Scripture. To do the wise thing requires an explanation of “why?” it is wise, not just “do what you think best without defined reasoning” (which is pragmatism)
5. Subjective claims (e.g the Spirit, conscience, peace) are subject to critique by our biblical understandings that produce our worldview and values.