

# Discerning God's Call

BY AMY CASTELLO

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As she concluded her story, Denise sobbed, "But what am I going to do?" She was finishing her final semester as a pre-med student with top grades and a high MCAT score when she realized that she did not want to be a doctor. She was terrified of disappointing her parents, professors, and friends, but she was more terrified of choosing a career that was wrong for her.

Denise's story is not all that uncommon. Over the years that I served as College Minister, I had countless conversations with students trying to figure out what they wanted to do with the rest of their lives. For many students, the most frightening aspect of their quest was wondering where God was in the midst of all their confusion. What was God's will for their lives? Was God's will different from their will? Most of us, whatever our stage in life, have felt the pressure of making decisions and wondering if our choices were pleasing to God.

As Christians, we talk about discerning God's will for our lives. Our *vocation*, or calling, should permeate our lives, shape all of our choices, and not be something we think about only when we face major decisions. Three recent books can help us discern God's guidance throughout our lives.

In *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002, 192 pp., \$15.00), Bruce K. Waltke challenges us to reassess the common choice of words, "finding God's will," because it suggests we can magically open the mind of the Almighty and know exactly what choice God would have us make. Waltke points out that this desire to search out the mind of God to get the right decision is really a form of divination, an idea prevalent in pagan religions.

The first part of *Finding the Will of God* explains the meaning of God's will and how it is often misinterpreted by pagan notions, and the second part outlines a program for God's guidance. Waltke does a thorough job of discussing both the various methods pagans used to divine the wills of their gods and how God's people in the Old Testament sought the will of God. It's fascinating to read about all the customs God offered Israel for finding guidance, but when we think about applying some of these methods to our life, it seems absurd. Can you imagine asking your pastor to employ the Urim and Thummin to determine God's will for you in a particular situation? (It's not clear exactly what Urim and Thummin were, but most scholars believe the priests carried two sticks with them, one black and the other white, which they would shake or toss to decide on a yes or no answer to a situation.) Or how much faith would you put in the practice of casting lots? If you are deciding whether to take a new job and move your family, would you draw straws to determine God's will? Even though these examples seem foreign to us now, Waltke warns that our methods of finding God's will, "like promise boxes and seeking signs," are often strikingly similar to those of the Old Testament. He asserts that we should no longer use these methods because we have been given "access to God through Jesus Christ and guidance from God through the Holy Spirit" (p. 12).

The second part of the book serves as a good refresher for Christians about what it means to be in relationship with God. We are reminded that if we want to experience God's guidance in our lives we need to read Scripture, develop a heart for God, seek wise counsel, look for God's providence, use common sense, and acknowledge divine intervention. The information on each of these points about God's guidance is helpful, but I found it ironic that after spending the first part of the book pointing out the fallacies in "finding the will of God" by pagan methods, Waltke then goes on to insist that we must follow his program of guidance in the exact order given. "[God] offers us clear guidance for living our lives to please Him. We must learn the concept of following God's program of guidance," Waltke says, for God has given "His saints a prioritized sequence" which begins with Holy Scripture (p. 59). Despite this somewhat rigid program, *Finding the Will of God* offers a useful perspective on discerning God's will in our lives and gives readers food for thought regarding their own understanding of God's will.

Gene Edward Veith, Jr. offers a much broader perspective of our Christian vocation in *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002, 176 pp., \$14.99). His book is based on concepts he found in Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation*. "For Luther, vocation, as with everything else in his theology, is not so much a matter of what *we* do," Veith writes, "rather, it is a matter of what *God* does in and

through us" (p. 9). Unlike Waltke, he is not so much interested in helping us discern God's will for our lives, but in helping us see that inherent in our accepting Christ is a call to live out our God-given vocation in every aspect of our lives. We now claim citizenship in two of God's kingdoms: earthly and spiritual. In the spiritual kingdom, Christ serves us; and in the earthly kingdom, we serve our neighbors. Veith claims, "The purpose of vocation is to love and serve one's neighbor. This is the test, the criterion, and the guide for how to live out each and every vocation anyone can be called to: How does my calling serve my neighbor?" (pp. 39-40). A major difference in the way *God at Work* portrays vocation and the way most Christians think of it is that for Veith each person has multiple vocations in the different realms of life. The workplace is only one of the places where we have a vocation, but some other areas include family, church, and society. Another challenge found in *God at Work* is the idea that "vocation is not self-chosen"; instead, we are called to our vocations (p. 50). The foundation of this belief is based on our faith experience. God calls us into faith; God first chose us and then we choose God. We are called to our vocations based on the circumstances into which we are placed by God. For instance, we did not choose our family, so our vocation in our family was chosen for us. How we choose to live out our vocation within our family is up to us, but here again God chose first. Veith takes this idea further by stating, "Even your wants—your desires, your dreams, your choices—are a function of who you are. That is to say, God—making use of your family and your culture—created you as you are" (p. 52). The doctrine of vocation deals with the mysteries of how God creates each individual to be unique and gives each person talents that are used at every stage of life. No vocation is greater than any other vocation. This broad idea of vocation arose during the Reformation when the notion of the "priesthood of all believers" stressed that all work was a sacred calling.

Though several chapters of *God at Work* which review some vocations (such as worker, citizen, and church member) tend to be a little tedious, they do help clarify how the doctrine of vocation applies to our lives. In his conclusion Veith helps us to understand why broadening our view of vocation is important: living out our faith in the everydayness of life is how others will ultimately come to know Christ. God is present in all the ordinary things we do; being aware of God's call on our lives helps us be more intentional about serving our neighbors in whatever way we are called.

*Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002, 272 pp., \$19.95) by Debra Farrington offers us a more practical, hands-on approach to understanding God's will. This beautifully formatted book is a primer for those who are interested in practicing discernment, a guide to help us listen to God. Farrington explains that *to discern* is more than simply understanding or making a

decision. The term comes from a Latin word that means “to separate apart,” so when discerning, we are “separating apart” those options before us while taking into account God’s will for us. The book is divided into three parts: the first gives a background in Scripture and church history for the discipline of discernment; the second offers tools for discernment; and the third section deals specifically with how to discern God’s will during

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the crossroads of one’s life. Interspersed throughout her text are wonderfully insightful quotes from a variety of people and sources.

Farrington employs the image of “God as water,” borrowed from contemporary theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, to say that God is pervasively present to everything, “God flows in and around all that exists” (p. 7). Our primary goal in the task of discernment is to learn to

be as present to God as God is to us. This is, of course, a lofty goal—one that most Christians struggle with for a good part of their journeys with God. Farrington reassures us that it is normal to face barriers when trying to draw closer to God, and she thoroughly explores the various obstacles we face when pursuing a discerning heart.

*Hearing with the Heart* reminds us that developing a hearing heart is not necessarily an easy process; it is about opening ourselves more and more to the presence of God in all areas of our lives. The tools for discernment described in the second part are a wonderful resource for doing this. One tool Farrington encourages us to use is silence, for we can truly listen to God only when we are still and allow God to speak to our hearts. To those who are uncomfortable at first with the stillness, she offers helpful advice on how to listen in the silence. Another tool is to discover our spiritual gifts. We often have trouble naming our gifts, but this book offers a very practical way to list our gifts and skills in order to be more discerning in our lives.

Anyone facing a specific vocational decision will find the third section of *Hearing with the Heart* helpful; it provides an almost step-by-step guide to hearing God while we are at the crossroads of life. Farrington reviews the guidelines for using reason and imagination to listen for God which are in Saint Ignatius’ *The Spiritual Exercises* (p. 143). Some of the steps discussed by

Ignatius include clarifying the question or central issue for discernment, remaining open and objective, praying to God, and using our imagination with God. For sorting through the major issues in our lives, Farrington recommends from the Quaker tradition a less familiar practice, forming a Clearness Committee. A group is gathered for the sole purpose of listening to a person's issue and helping them seek God's voice. The committee does not offer advice, but listens to God with the person. This practice is based on the assumption that in community we are better able to hear the voice of God.

A common theme in these vastly different books is that discernment of God's desires for us is integrally related to our relationship with God. We cannot expect to know God's will unless we are willing to give time and energy to being with God. This simple idea grounds each of these texts: if we want to know God's will, we must know God. They also wisely agree that living out our vocation is not a clear-cut process, and might appreciate Anne Lamott's description of her pastor's experience in praying for direction: "We in our faith work stumble along toward where we think we're supposed to go, bumbling along, and here is what's so amazing—we end up getting exactly where we're supposed to be."<sup>†</sup>

Both Waltke and Farrington deliver practical methods for hearing God in the cacophony of our lives. Veith presents a Christian worldview that stretches beyond the one held by many churchgoers: God is at work in every aspect of our life, and what we do in every area of our life matters because it is a product of living out our vocations and serving our neighbor so God's love will be known by all. Each book is written in an accessible style and will encourage us to be serious about living out our vocations as children of God.

#### **NOTE**

<sup>†</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 84.

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**AMY CASTELLO**

*is a freelance writer and former Minister of Congregational Life at Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.*