

Knowing the Will of God, by Bruce Waltke, with Jerry MacGregor (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1998). Paperback \$8.95. 167 pages. Reviewed by George Meisinger.

Dr. Bruce K. Waltke is one of this generation's outstanding Old Testament and Hebrew scholars. Serious students of the Bible know him for *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*.¹ and as co-author of *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*.² He wrote "Micah"³ in the Tyndale Commentary Series, as well as countless high-level journal articles. Dr. Waltke was on the committee of biblical translators of the NIV and was the Old Testament editor of the *New Geneva Study Bible*. A publisher recently noted that a commentary on Genesis by Waltke is forthcoming. He started his teaching career at Dallas Theological Seminary—where this reviewer had the privilege of majoring under him. Since those days, Waltke has departed his dispensational roots and taught at Regent College in British Columbia, Canada, Westminster Seminary, and presently is Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Florida.

In light of these high-level works, it may surprise some to find this new book so practical and down-to-earth. However, those who have sat in Waltke's classroom, talked with him personally, or listened to his messages at a church or Bible conference, know that for him the Bible is not merely an academic textbook, or battleground for theological debate. He is a man in pursuit of truth, though many of his theological convictions depart from those

¹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1980).

² Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

³ Bruce K. Waltke, "Micah," in *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, by David W. Baker, Bruce K. Waltke, and T. Desmond Alexander, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Leicester, England, and Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1988).

embraced at CTS. Nevertheless, what he shares with his readers in this booklet has value.

The broad strokes of the book are two: Part One: Right and Wrong Concepts, i.e., regarding the pursuit of God's will, and Part Two: God's Program of Guidance.

Chapter one asks the question "What is God's Will?" noting that "will" is a difficult term for it has multiple uses in the Bible. These he helpfully explains and, as throughout the book, he roots what he says in Scripture, dealing with the ideas of "Finding' God's Will," "Man's Search for Authority," and "Divining the Will of God." He makes the point that the will of God is not always fair, as man defines fairness.

Instructively, the outcomes of faith for the first three heroes of faith celebrated in Hebrews 11 vary considerable. Abel believed God, and he died; Enoch believed God, and he did not die; Noah believed God, and everybody else died. The only thing they had in common is that they believed God and it pleased Him.⁴

In an on-going exposé of false attempts to discern God's will, we learn that the "hunch" method falls short. Instead of making decisions based on hunches, Waltke points us to biblical "wisdom." "'Wisdom' in the Old Testament is a character trait, not simply thinking soberly. People with wisdom have the character to make good decisions. They don't have to rely on faulty logic."⁵ The concept of *character* is a note struck over-and-over in the book.

Chapter Two is an eye-opener: "Pagans and the Will of God." The author appraises the ancient use of "casting lots," looking for signs, involvement with idols, watching the stars (astrology), fortune telling, and talking with spirits. What pagans have done (and do) bears uncanny resemblance to what many Christians pass

⁴ Bruce Waltke, with Jerry MacGregor, *Knowing the Will of God*, (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1998), 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

off as divine guidance. Next follows a discussion of legitimate means God used to reveal His will in Old Testament times, e.g., the Urim and Thummin, sacred lot, dreams, and signs. Regarding the latter, we discover that Gideon asked for a sign out of unbelief. Thus, putting out a fleece is a model of unbelief, not a normative practice to discern God's will.⁶ In what amounts to a preview of much that follows in the book, Waltke says,

The Spirit enlightens (Ephesians 1:17, 18), regenerates (John 3:5–8), sanctifies (Galatians 5:16–18), transforms (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:22, 23), and gives God's people what they need in order to serve Him (1 Corinthians 12:4–11). God leads His people not through signs but through His Word, His Holy Spirit, His church, Christian friends who offer godly counsel, and His providential circumstances.⁷

Concluding Part One, Waltke states “God does not administer His church in the same way He administered old Israel. He administered old Israel by the Mosaic Law, but no longer administers His people by that law. He administers us by the Spirit, not the law, and this changed at Pentecost.”⁸

Part Two: God's Program of Guidance develops six principles, which the author labels “a six-point program of [God's] supervised care in directing His elect.”⁹ Reminding us that the Lord guides, not hides, from His people, Waltke devotes a chapter to each of the six points.

Point one in God's program is “Read your Bible.” In fact, he says, “*The order of those six steps is very important,*”¹⁰ thus leaving no question in our minds as to the primacy of knowing the Bible's contents.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁹ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰ Ibid.

There is no better way to know and experience God than through His living Word, for it is His fundamental revelation instructing us. For all those who seek to “discover God’s will” for their lives, I offer 1 Thessalonians 5:15–18: “See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (NASB).¹¹

Waltke acknowledges that today is “a golden age for Christian publishing.” The upside is that one may choose from thousands of interesting, helpful, and profound books. The downside is that far too many occupy themselves with books about the Book, but shy away from Scripture itself. He then quotes Psalm 119:1–11, as well as a number of later verses in this chapter, to validate the importance of reading God’s Word. He adds that it is important to pray as we read, citing Colossians 1:9–14, to memorize and meditate (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:1–3; 119:27, 97; Proverbs 6:21–22), and to obey with humility (illustrating with the story of Micaiah, 1 Kings 22). One will not walk away from this chapter without seeing the supreme importance of reading God’s Word.

Point Two in God’s program of divine guidance is “Develop a Heart for God.”¹² Christians sometimes withdraw from their desires, thinking that if they *want* something, automatically it is wrong. However, David was confident that the Lord would *grant me my every desire* (2 Samuel 23:5). The Psalmist writes *Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart* (Psalm 37:4). The point is that there are godly desires, illustrated in Romans 1:11; 15:20; 1 Corinthians 10:27. Nevertheless, the author insists that one must correlate “desires” to Scripture, to submission to the Lord, to faith, and to prayer. Regarding prayer, he says,

¹¹ Ibid., 59.

¹² Ibid., 79.

This is where a proper understanding of James 1:5 comes in: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God.” When we pray to God for wisdom, we are looking for Him to develop the *character* of wisdom in our lives. “The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17).¹³

Once again the chimes ring that godly character is the bedrock upon which divine guidance happens.

Point Three in God’s program of guidance is “Seek Wise Counsel.” Here, among other matters, Waltke tackles the question “What is the Call of God?” He gives us a definition: *A call is an inner desire given by the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, and confirmed by the community of Christ.*¹⁴ The definition shows the priority of the Word and one’s inner convictions. Yet, the Lord gives a role to mature believers. “Without the affirmation of the body, one must question the legitimacy of the call, but priority must still be given to the Word of God and the desires of the heart.” Waltke then directs our attention to 1 Kings 13 where God clearly informed a young prophet to go to Bethel. The Lord also made it clear that he was to execute his ministry, then return immediately home without eating or drinking. An old prophet, however, invited the young man to his home for a meal, claiming that he had a new word from God permitting the young man to eat with him. The young prophet listened to the Word of the old prophet, rather than to the direct word he had received from God. Because the young prophet disobeyed a direct word from God, he suffered the sin unto death.

The point of the story is that if God clearly tells you to do something, don’t disobey just because someone tells you something different. Wise counsel should be sought when the Bible and your inner desires are not clear, but the counsel of others should never negate what you heard the Lord say to you through

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 107.

Scripture. God's Word takes precedence over the counsel of others.¹⁵

Point Four of God's six-point program is "Look for God's Providence," i.e., the circumstances of life out of our control, which are also God's will.¹⁶ The writer then introduces us to a very interesting line-up of providential circumstances that affected Paul's ministry and travels (Acts 16:7; 18:21; Romans 16:7; 2 Corinthians 1:17). The admonition of James 4:13–17 to businessmen who would make plans without leaving room for God to intervene catches our attention. It becomes clear that circumstances beyond our control are part of God's guidance. Thus, we must accept them as from the Lord. The author reminds us that God chose us with a plan¹⁷ and that the Lord "chose you not because you impressed Him, but so that He could impress the world about Himself."¹⁸ In fact, playing off 1 Corinthians 1:26–29, we read that the Lord "looks for misfits and milquetoasts, schmucks and schlemiels. It's not that He has to make do with a bunch of fools, He chooses them."¹⁹ Obviously, this is a good chapter to help keep one's arrogance under control!

In the pursuit of divine guidance, one must not put circumstances above God's word.²⁰ Two excellent examples from David's life illustrate. In Samuel 24 and 26, David had two opportunities to kill Saul who had been seeking diligently to kill him. It seemed to on-lookers that God had providentially delivered Saul into David's hands. David, however, refused to kill Saul because the Lord had not authorized him to usurp the king's authority.

You can't take a bit of good timing as concrete evidence of God's will. You can't take God's providence and make it normative for

¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

¹⁶ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸ Ibid., 117–18.

¹⁹ Ibid., 118.

²⁰ Ibid., 124.

every situation, or you will get into big trouble . . . [David] would not put his circumstance ahead of God’s Word, nor would he allow the situation to take precedence over what he knew in his heart to be right.²¹

Point five in the six-point program to know God’s will is to ask, “Does this Make Sense?”²² “God gave each of us a brain, and He expects us to put it to good use.” Many biblical examples exist of believers using their heads as they walked before the Lord (Joshua 9:25; 1 Samuel 1:23; 2 Samuel 18:4; 1 Chronicles 13:2; 2 Chronicles 30:23; Ezra 7:18; Acts 15:22; 20:16). Unbelievers or pagans do not receive guidance from God, thus they must rely solely on their reasoning processes. Christians receive divine guidance, having the powerful means of the first four points to help.

The development of point five some may find disturbing. Why?—because too many Christians prefer to have a cut-and-dried “do and don’t” list handed to them by which they may unthinkingly conduct their lives. This chapter does not condone a mindless approach to learning God’s will. One must ask the question, “Does this make sense?” Waltke provides several standards by which to measure whether something makes sense or not: (a) Trust God in your logic—examples are from the lives of Abraham, Orpah, and Ruth. (b) Decide in the light of Scripture, that is, do not make any decision that negates Scripture. Examples come from the lives of Paul, Barnabas, and from Waltke’s counseling experience. (c) Decide in the light of giftedness, with examples from Acts 6; Romans 12:3. (d) Decide according to your ability; know who you are. The principle draws from sources like Acts 11:29 and Deuteronomy 34:10–12. (e) Decide according to your circumstances—with fascinating examples from Acts 9:23–25; 16:3; 1 Corinthians 16:5–9. (f) Decide according to an overall strategy, with an example from Paul’s plan to visit Macedonia and Corinth (2 Corinthians 1).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²² *Ibid.*, 129.

The final point of the six-point program for learning God's will is "Divine Intervention."²³ Up front, Waltke says, on the one hand, we should consider divine intervention as the last aspect of learning God's will. We take action first in reading and meditating upon God's Word, in following the desires of our heart, in listening to wise counsel, in considering God providence, and finally, in reasoning with the framework of our circumstances. On the other hand, "*God does not intervene in response to seeking His will in a perplexing situation.* There are no examples of God stepping miraculously into the life of anyone in the New Testament in response to the seeking of His will."

Divine intervention usually is limited to one of three roles: revealing a great truth, saving one of God's children from an intolerable situation, or revealing why a Christian should act in violation of God's normal program of guidance.²⁴

Returning to a recurrent theme, Waltke does not ask whether you are seeking miraculous signs and wonders and providential circumstances, but "Are You Obedient?" The following quotation strikes at the heart of the book's thesis:

God honors obedience. He is in your life, ready to lead you according to His program of guidance. But He cannot lead a person who does not listen to Him, who is not close to Him. If you are struggling with a specific question, rather than trying to magically divine God's answer, spend time drawing close to Him. Then your character, and perhaps your perspective, will change. Then God will shape your desires. Then you will have the mind of Christ.²⁵

"Afterword" is the title of the book's last chapter. It focuses attention on the importance and primacy of God's Word—on doctrine. The point is that sound theology leads to godly character and only from godly character may one follow God's guidance.

²³ Ibid., 143.

²⁴ Ibid., 144.

²⁵ Ibid., 151.

For students questioning what Waltke means in areas that touch on the revelatory process, the following—based on a personal letter—will clarify:

(1) On page 23, he says, “I do believe in special revelation, and I do think that too many conservative scholars have no place for God’s special intercession [intervention?] because they have no control over it. We can’t force God to talk, yet sometimes He completely surprises us and talks anyway.” Accordingly, Waltke holds to special ongoing revelation other than illumination. This reviewer believes, on the other hand, that a strong case exists from 1 Corinthians 13:8–12; Ephesians 2:20; Hebrews 2:1–4; and Jude 1:3 for the cessation of the revelatory process in the first century.

(2) On page 47, he says, “I certainly believe that God can work through my dreams to offer me guidance if He chooses to do so, but I also believe He has offered me better alternatives that I can put into practice to determine His will.” Waltke accepts that dreams such as happened to Joseph, Daniel, Peter, and Paul occur today, though affirms that written revelation is better.

(3) On pages 144–145, he says, “Do not misunderstand me: God still gives His people visions and miraculously calls them to ministry at times.” Again, such ongoing revelatory activity he accepts, yet states that God “calls” and gives visions only sovereignly. They are not something believers should seek.

(4) On page 162, he says, “There is a profound difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge.” When questioned, Waltke appealed to the Hebrew usage of “know that” (*yāda’ kî*) and “know” (*yāda’*) to validate his differentiation between head and heart belief. He supported his view from Isaiah: “Cyrus *knew that* the Lord was God” (45:3–4a), but did not *know* the Lord (45:4b). The safest course is to say, instead, that although Cyrus knew that the Lord was God, Cyrus lacked sufficient content for characterizing him as one who knew God. The problem was not with an insufficient type of knowledge, but with an insufficient content of knowledge. Readers interested in pursuing this subject

will do well to read, Gordon Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith*.²⁶ People use this head/heart differentiation frequently, but attempts to explain it far too often slide into false doctrine, making “heart belief” a composition of works and faith. This muddies the waters of Romans 11:6, which creates a sharp antithesis between faith and works. However one interprets Cyrus’ “know that” versus “know,” we must not compromise the free grace message of God for eternal life and forgiveness.

Apart from areas where theological differences exist, this book is a goldmine on a subject important to all believers. It is true that the author’s Reformed orientation bubbles up on occasion. Other remarks reveal that Waltke does not believe that the “sign gifts” ceased in the first century. These matters are, however, subdued and do not negate the value of this book.

Those who have read Garry Friesen’s book, *Decision Making and the Will of God*,²⁷ will find some overlap, yet Waltke’s book is well worth the purchase price. It should be useful not only for personal edification, but as a guide for home Bible classes, Sunday School discussions, and even to guide those in ministry toward sound doctrine. Though this book is currently out-of-print, Waltke says that a new printing is underway.

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²⁶ Gordon Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983).

²⁷ Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980).