

EDITORIAL: Did God really tell you to do that?

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How should we—finite human beings—determine, much less claim, the will of infinite God Almighty?

The question arose with robust regularity across the past few months. At least three politicians indicated they decided to run for president of the United States because God told them to. If this struck you as a bit baffling, and perhaps outright ironic, raise your hand. Me, too.

Editor Marv Knox

Why would God tell three people to run for president at the same time? We can look at this situation from at least two perspectives. First, give them the benefit of the doubt and acknowledge each candidate heard God clearly, and God wanted all of them to run for president. In this case, isn't God acting as a bully? The only political contest I ever lost was for vice president of my sophomore class in high school, and that hurt like crazy. It's hard to imagine the psychological beating a losing U.S. presidential candidate must endure. A God who tells someone to sustain the rigors of a presidential campaign only to suffer the disappointment of defeat isn't very nice. Second, consider the logical conclusion that at least a couple of the candidates misunderstood. God did not tell them to run for president. Then how could leaders who feel wise enough to be president get something so important so wrong?

Obviously, one's sense of self gets involved in life's biggest decisions. We don't need presidential candidates to illustrate that fact. Have you ever considered a major life judgment—say, whether to marry this particular person, or buy precisely that house, or take that specific job—from a purely

spiritual perspective? Me, neither, even though I've sincerely tried on many occasions. Always, my own self interest competes with my discernment of divine will. Try as I might to account for my ego, my own peccadilloes and perspectives, I always acknowledge they play a part in determining the decision.

More and more, I identify with the aged rabbi who participated in an interfaith dialogue with a group that included an energetic and demonstrative young Christian pastor. The pastor dominated each discussion, confidently proclaiming God's position on every issue. After many hours of talks, the wise old rabbi turned to a friend and admitted, "I'm never as certain about anything as that young man is about everything." Through the years, I've learned to allow my suspicion to rise in direct proportion to the certainty with which someone claims to know God's will.

Still, one of the main tasks of the Christian life is figuring out WWJD—What would Jesus do? When our faith is purest, we want to make decisions that are congruent with God's will and plan for our lives.

No process is perfect, but we can take several steps that help:

- **Stand under Scripture.** Baptists say we are "people of the book," and so we turn to the Bible when we make major decisions. Do specific Scripture passages speak to the choices we must make? Of course, most of our major life decisions are so specific, Bible passages don't address them. But the principles we gain from the Bible help us: Which choice will give the most glory to God? Which reflects love for God and others? Which leads us to serenity of spirit? Which enables us to serve others—to be a better parent, or spouse, or friend? Which blesses others?
- **Sit in community.** Jesus gave us family and the church for several good reasons, but one of the best is corporate discernment. No, we don't take

every personal decision to a church business meeting. But if we live in close community with Christian family members and other Christians, we can lean on a valuable resource for evaluating the options that shape our lives.

- **Kneel in humility.** Absolute certitude weaves an inescapable straightjacket. If we claim we are 100 percent sure God told us to do something and it doesn't work out, we embarrass ourselves and undermine God's credibility. But if we are willing to say: "I sense God's leadership. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I'm heading this way," then we remain free to walk in the light of fresh revelations.

—*Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard. Visit his blog at baptiststandard.com.*