



Critical Issues Commentary

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PERSONAL WORDS FROM GOD

How People Become False Prophets To Themselves

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“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” (Deuteronomy 29:29)

The Bible tells us that God has spoken, infallibly, finally, and authoritatively through people He chose as mediators of His revelation. This is summarized in **Hebrews 1:1, 2**: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.” The Bible further tells us that Christ’s words to us were confirmed through eyewitnesses, the apostles. **Hebrews 2:2, 3** says, “For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty, how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard.” The apostles were responsible for giving us the New Testament that constitutes Christ’s authoritative words to His church—the revealed truths that remain binding on all.

In this article let us consider this question: Can a believer receive special revelations that become God’s personal, revealed will for his or her life? Many believe that this special revelation is real—that God provides it today. I contend that they have not thought through some of the concept’s problematic implications. In this article: I will defend the idea that God, since the days of the apostles, has been ruling providentially rather than through further specific revelation—whether through authoritative mediators or directly to individuals.

PERSONAL WORDS FROM GOD

In considering the issue of God speaking to us, it is helpful to focus on knowledge and divide it into two large categories: that which can be known through observation of the creation using our physical senses, and that which can only be known through revelation. We are free to study and learn what pertains to the first category by using the rational minds God has given us. The second category can be further divided into two parts: that which God has revealed and the secret things that belong only to God (**Deuteronomy 29:29**). What God has revealed is contained in the Bible. That leaves a second category—the secret things.

With these categories established, then let us consider how to categorize “personal words from God.” These words are not observable aspects of creation (called general revelation in theology¹) so do not fall into that category. Therefore, according to our categorization, they are either special revelation from God or unrevealed secret information (the occult). Since nearly every Christian would consider occult knowledge illegitimate, then those who claim special words from God must consider them to be special revelation from God.

Considering personal words from God (throughout the rest of this article PWFG or PWsFG will designate “personal word(s) from God”) to be special revelation is exactly what makes them so problematic. In the last issue² we showed from Scripture that special rev-

elation came through God’s chosen mediators who spoke authoritatively for God. The only exception was when God gave ordained means of guidance such as the Urim and Thummim (**Exodus 28:30**). But even those revealed God’s will only because they were ordained by God as spoken through an authoritative mediator (Moses). The truth of God came to the people of God through His ordained mediators. If we take PWsFG to be special revelation, then we are implying that every believer has become an authoritative mediator of special revelation. Now that is really problematic.

I have discussed this matter with people who strongly believe in divine guidance that is specific for each individual. Their answer to my challenge is that they are not claiming to mediate special revelation to the church; they claim these words only as personal words for their own lives. But consider this: Prophets who spoke for God had to be 100 percent accurate (**Deuteronomy 18:22**). So if indeed PWsFG are specific revelations from God to the individual, are these also inerrant? I have yet to speak with someone who believes in PWsFG who claimed to know that the words were perfectly accurate and infallibly from God. Neither do they claim that these words have the same quality as inerrant Scripture.

If PWsFG are a mixture—some of which may be from God and some of which are in error—then some means of telling the difference is necessary. But what possible means are there? Since these PWsFG are specific to individuals and cover conceivably any aspect of life, they cannot be tested by Scripture. For example, suppose I receive a PWFG that tells me to move to Iowa and start a church. How am I to test it? Some would say to consult other Christians. But this really doesn’t change the problem, it just diffuses it. If the idea of moving to Iowa and starting a church may or may not be a true word from God and it

cannot be tested by scripture, since the Bible does not dictate where we must live, then what remains is a group of people who are not infallible prophets of God trying to receive special revelation. The group is no more inerrant and authoritative than the individual.

In practice, people who believe in PWsFG tend to rely on pragmatic tests. One often hears what I call “miracle guidance stories.” Generally someone claims to have received a PWFG, took action and the result was something significant or extraordinary. Some leaders tell so many miracle guidance stories that they convince followers of their special status with God like Moses or Elijah. But when pressed to defend their practice, these leaders usually admit that if a course of action that was taken based on a PWFG did not appear to work out well, the result was no proof their personal “word” was not from God.

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Let’s look at a pragmatic test. A person gets a special revelation to take a certain action. This revelation is not infallible, and the person does not claim to be an infallible prophet. The person takes the prescribed action and something great happens, or nothing special happens. In either case they still do not know if the word was an inerrant, authoritative word from God because good things happen sometimes to misguided people, and bad things happen to well-guided people. Pragmatic tests for truth are not valid.

Consider Jeremiah for example. He was an ordained prophet of God and spoke authoritatively for God. But his true guidance brought him a lifetime of continual misery and personal rejection. The whole nation failed to listen to him and in the end he was hauled away to Egypt by people who refused to listen to his true word from God. If judged pragmatically Jeremiah would be deemed a failure. But his true words from God were inerrant and comprise a book of the Bible.

Miracle guidance stories, used to make certain people appear to have

“heard from God”, are of no value. They are not the Biblical test for prophets and cannot be because they are not specifically Christian. Psychics and New Agers have their own genre of miracle guidance stories that enhance their credibility. My friend Brian Flynn tells testimonies of how, before he was saved out of the New Age, he gave some very accurate psychic readings that created “miracle” guidance stories for people.³ The requirements in Deuteronomy 18 and 13 are there to protect us from “words from ‘God’” that are not from God. These tests require perfect predictive accuracy and the teaching of correct doctrine about the “God we have known.”

The failure of pragmatic tests means that in the end, once someone has received a PWFG, whether something favorable or unfavorable resulted, the person still cannot be sure that it was truly God who spoke.

Such personal guidance is impossible to test. This creates a very troubling side effect. People suppose themselves to be authoritatively bound by a “will of God” that is revealed specifically and personally to each Christian. But the Christian can never be sure that he knows he has found this “will of God.” How can errant, non-authoritative words that may or may not be from God be binding? They cannot. To make them so is abusive.

Someone might counter that if a person thinks a word is from God, then “whatever is not of faith is sin.” In other words, believing something to be from God binds his personal conscience to it; and since his faith is in that word, it would be sin to not follow it. But this means that any person who has placed faith in a misplaced object of faith is bound to stay in that condition. Luther argued against that position, for example, when he claimed that people who took special religious oaths (like monks) had sworn to what is bondage and not from God. Therefore they should renounce those vows as based on lies and falsehood. Lies and falsehood are

not proper objects of faith.⁴

BECOMING A FALSE PROPHET TO ONE’S OWN SELF

We have argued in previous editions of CIC that to prophesy is to speak authoritatively for God.⁵ Special prophets that God raised up to predict the future had to be 100 percent accurate. If they were not accurate to that degree, people were commanded not to listen to them. If we claim to have heard a word from God that He gave in order to direct our lives, then the same standard applies. It is as if we prophesy to ourselves in God’s name. Doing so must meet all the Biblical tests for prophets. If we fail the test, then we have become false prophets to our own selves; consequently, we should not listen to ourselves! If we were wrong even once, then we are unreliable and cannot be trusted to speak for God. Period.

Some may object that people who prophesy in the manner of 1Corinthians 14 (unto edification, exhortation, and comfort) do not have to meet such tests. They speak and the others judge. But this type of prophecy is to bring out implications and applications of Scripture. Everyone has the Bible as an objective means to judge such prophecy. If they have claimed that a certain passage implies that certain actions or attitudes are binding on the church, everyone can judge this because implications and applications are logically connected to the meaning of the text.

But PWsFG are of a different sort. If someone claims that God told him to start a certain business, by what means are the others to judge this? The type of prophecy that is derived from the meaning of the text is controlled by the inerrant and authoritative word from God. So if it is a true implication of Scripture it, too, is authoritative. But subjective words about matters not bound by Scripture cannot be judged in this way, as we showed earlier. These subjective revelations are neither inerrant nor authoritative.

So the person who got a PWFG that really was not from God is binding himself to what God has not spoken. It is a

sin to bind what God has not bound, or loose what God has not loosed. Let me give a couple of examples. Consider this passage:

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. (1Timothy 4:1-3)

If someone spoke to the church and forbade marriage in God's name, clearly he would be a false prophet teaching a doctrine of demons. But what if the person speaks this word to himself? That is he determines to have a PWFG saying he cannot marry. Why is he any less a false prophet than if he said the same thing to the church?

A man is free to marry in the Lord or to not marry. If he chooses to not marry as Paul did (see his discussion in 1Corinthians 7) that is within his Christian liberty. If he marries, it is within his Christian liberty as well ("*if you marry you have not sinned*" – 1Corinthians 7:28a). But what if a man says, "God spoke to me that I must not marry but remain single"? According to 1Timothy 4:3 he is teaching a doctrine of demons to his own self. The only way to escape the logic of this is to claim that anyone can speak in God's name to his own self without those words fitting any Biblical test. But that would open the door to any possible error and bondage. This same argument applies to taking oaths such as the oath of chastity that monks take.⁶ One has bound oneself in God's name presumptuously.

Let us consider another issue from the passage in 1Timothy 4. Suppose someone spoke in God's name to the church, forbidding the eating of pork. According to our passage, that is a doctrine of demons. Suppose someone said,

"God told me I am not allowed to eat pork." How is it any less a doctrine of demons when spoken to one member of the church (i.e., one's self) than to the whole church? Any person is free to not eat pork without recrimination. But if they try to add God's imprimatur to this they make themselves an invalid lawgiver.

Therefore, PWsFG that are taken to be binding and authoritative, whether given to the church or one's own self, are false. All words that claim to be God's inerrant and authoritative word when they are not are false prophecies. Those who speak false words in God's name to their own selves and thus bind themselves to those words have become false prophets to their own selves. They should quit listening to themselves!

The Difference Between Special Revelation and Providence

Those who teach that PWsFG are to be the normal experience of all Christians often write literature where Biblical characters are used as examples. They argue that if God can speak to Moses, God can speak to us.⁷ The issue is not God's ability to speak or God's unchanging nature, but how God has chosen to speak. As we argued in the previous issue, people under the Old Covenant, like Korah, made the same argument that God could speak to anyone. But God had chosen to speak through Moses as Korah found out in a most horrific way.

God chose to speak authoritatively to the patriarchs, Moses, the prophets, Jesus and the apostles. Their words are God's words that are binding on all. But, is being the recipient of special revelation normative for all? Clearly it is not. We are bound to pay attention to the words of those through whom God has chosen to speak: "*how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will*" (Hebrews 2:3, 4). God spoke through them in extraordinary ways and

thus the faith was "once for all" delivered to the saints.

Even in Biblical times there were long periods without any record of God giving special revelations. For example, from the time of Joseph through the first eighty years of Moses' life, there is nothing said about God speaking to anyone. God was fulfilling His promise to Abraham that his descendants would be oppressed for 400 years but afterward come out with many possessions (Genesis 15:13, 14). During those years, God's purposes were being fulfilled just as fully as they were during the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when God spoke directly to them.

Consider the first eighty years of Moses' life. The story of his birth; hidden for three months, placed in an ark of bulrushes, placed in the Nile, found by Pharaoh's daughter, given back to his mother, and raised in the royal court of Pharaoh—the story contains not one mention of God directly speaking to anyone. In fact, after Moses killed an Egyptian and fled to Midian, he was there for 40 years with no record of God speaking to anyone until the incident at the burning bush. But everything that happened leading up to that incident was God providentially working to fulfill His promises to Abraham.

Many Christians have a poor grasp of the Biblical doctrine of providence. This leads them to the conclusion that unless they regularly receive PWsFG, God is not leading them or working in their lives. Moses' mother did not get a word from God to put him in the Nile. But God used it. Consider the book of Esther. God is never mentioned in Esther, but the entire book is about God's providential working through Esther to save His people. The turning point in the Esther narrative is found in Mordecai's words: "*Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?'*" (Esther 4:13, 14). Providentially, God

had placed Esther in the place of royalty, so she was urged to take action, which she did. God providentially saved the Jews and preserved the Messianic promises through people who heard no special word from God.

For 400 years—from Malachi to John the Baptist—there were no authoritative prophets in Israel—and they knew it. Several passages in the intertestamental book of Maccabees show that they were well aware they had no prophet. For example, “And they laid up the stones in the mountain of the temple in a convenient place, till there should come a prophet, and give answer concerning them” (I Maccabees 4:46).⁸ But, in Daniel 11 there is detailed prophecy about what would happen during the intertestamental period. These are given in so much detail that liberal critics claim Daniel must have been written after the events. What this shows us is that God is sovereignly ruling providentially to bring to pass His purposes and that He is able to do so without someone alive who is currently receiving special revelations to guide His people. God brought salvation history forward from Malachi to John the Baptist exactly as Daniel predicted and did so with no prophets during those years.

What we see from these examples is that during those periods, without any special revelation other than what had been given previously to others, God worked His plan through people just as effectively as He did through direct revelation. God’s providential rule is not a lesser way for God to care for His people.

UNDERSTANDING PROVIDENCE

Providence includes good and evil. Even wicked kings are “established by God” according to **Romans 13:1**. Dreams, visions, subjective impressions, etc. are part of God’s providence. They, too, contain good and evil. They are not inerrant specific revelation unless they are given to proven prophets who meet all the tests. Daniel was a proven prophet. His dream (Daniel 7) was authoritative revelation from God, not

merely a part of God’s providence. The king of Babylon’s dream was part of providence, but in his case there was an authoritative prophet to interpret it. Had there not been an authoritative prophet he could not have known the meaning.

Since providence contains good and evil, so do subjective impressions that are part of God’s providential rule. Sometimes as Christians we have dreams that we might consider spiritually significant. Sometimes we have subjective impressions that we may think are important. Since we are not infallible prophets, we cannot determine that any particular dream or subjective impression is a specific revelation from God. But we can make decisions that are within the realm of Christian liberty.

For example, in 1971, several weeks after my conversion, I had a dream that I was sitting in the small country church I grew up in. In the dream I was sitting with my brother in the back pew. A young girl was singing and it seemed to me that her song was being used by God to touch people’s hearts. Then it struck me that the people in that church had not heard the gospel in a clear way, so they would not know what God expected of them. So, in my dream, I got up and preached the gospel to them. When I woke up, I clearly remembered the dream and it made an impression on me. That fall I returned to Iowa State University as a junior in Chemical Engineering. On Sunday mornings and Sunday nights I attended a Pentecostal church in Ames, Iowa. I spent a lot of time praying and seeking God. During that time the idea grew strong in my mind that I should go to Bible College and study for the ministry.

During those first weeks at Iowa State I was enrolled in a class on the philosophy of science. In one lecture the professor made the claim that the two ways of knowing truth were divine revelation and the scientific method. He said, “Divine revelation is hogwash.” But concerning the scientific method, this man was a very early proponent of what we now call postmodernism. He claimed that all theories are “true” but that some don’t work so well in the uni-

verse we happen to live in. He said there is no “TRUTH” but only theory. So I asked at the end of the lecture, “Are you saying that it is impossible to know the truth?” He answered, “Yes.” That experience made me long to learn what I knew to be true—the words of the Bible. Coupled with other amazing circumstances, I decided to quit the university and enroll in Bible College.

The process partially described above is how I ended up being a preacher of the gospel rather than a chemical engineer. That was God’s providential working in my life. But I do not consider the dream nor any other impression or experience I had that led me to Bible College, inerrant, authoritative revelation. I certainly am not an infallible prophet. But the doctrine of providence describes how God uses all things as He works in us and through us to bring about His purposes. Even our desires are part of providence. We do not have to fear, as we make choices within the realm of Christian liberty, that God’s plan will be derailed because we failed to gain special revelation.

In the books of Acts, we have an example of people giving Paul directional guidance and Paul ignoring it, even though it was from the “Spirit.” Here is the passage: “*After looking up the disciples, we stayed there [Tyre] seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem*” (**Acts 21:4**). From Tyre they journeyed to Ptolemais and then Caesarea. There a prophet spoke about Paul’s trip:

As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be

bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”
(Acts 21:10-13)

First the Spirit spoke through believers that Paul should not go to Jerusalem and then a valid prophet spoke by the Holy Spirit telling Paul what would happen if he did go. Yet Paul went. If guidance that we know (through the inspired writer Luke) was from the Spirit was not binding on Paul, how much less is subjective guidance that we do not know is from the Spirit binding on decisions that are within the realm of Christian liberty?

The story of Paul's journey to Jerusalem also invalidates the idea that decisions by the church about what the Spirit is saying concerning personal guidance are binding on the individual. Earlier in Acts we read: *“Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, ‘After I have been there, I must also see Rome’* (Acts 19:21). Paul's own decision to go the Jerusalem was not overridden by future words from the Spirit or prophecy from the church. Furthermore, once the church realized that Paul had made his own decision, we read this: *“And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, ‘The will of the Lord be done!’”* (Acts 21:14). God's will was not revealed by the Spirit speaking through church members or by a prophet, but by Paul's decision. Thus God's providential will in matters of Christian liberty is made known by the decision of the person involved.

WE ARE SAFE IN GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL CARE

One great section of Scripture that every Christian should learn and apply is **Romans 8:26-39**. It describes the doctrine of providence and various implications of it.⁹ The most important implication is that all of the Lord's people shall stay safe in Him and shall be brought to glory and conformity to the image of Christ. There is nothing in the

section that requires specific revelations beyond Scripture. Our security in Christ is not dependent on our gaining revelation or personal guidance. In fact that section begins by telling us that we do not know what we need: *“And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God”* (Romans 8:26, 27). Beyond Scripture, we do not know God's future, providential will for us. But the Holy Spirit prays for us “according to the will of God.” There is no indication that if we gained PWsFG we then would know how to pray as we should. The Holy Spirit Himself prays for us according to God's will.

God will not judge us for failing to “obey” PWsFG that we cannot know to be from Him. What God does tell us to do is ask for wisdom: *“But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him”* (James 1:5). Contrary to what some think, as we will see when we examine a passage later in James, this is not a prayer for a PWFG. It is a prayer that God would so work in our lives that we will make wise and godly decisions. This is much like the previous verses in James which teach that trials and testing produce endurance. God gives wisdom for decision making, but we make the decisions. The PWFG approach assumes that God wants to make every decision for us and that we need special revelation of God's decision. But that produces “reproach,” which James says asking for wisdom does not. Why? Because if one thinks he has a PWFG and follows it, and the result is disaster, he comes under the reproach of assuming he heard wrongly. But when we ask for wisdom which is the result of the fear of God, love for the truth, our developing a Christian worldview and consequently developing Christian values, we make wise decisions.¹⁰ There is no reproach because we, within our

Christian liberty and in light of our Christian values, made a decision. The outcome of our decision is unknown until God's providential will is revealed as history unfolds. But there is no reproach because of the way we made the decision.

This brings us to a key passage that shows that making decisions based on special revelation is not God's normative plan for Christians:

Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16)

This passage provides very important evidence that the PWFG approach is not Biblical. If indeed the Biblical pattern was for all Christians to receive special revelation from God that directs their future plans, then the passage would say, “You ought to have asked, ‘Lord tell us Your will about whether to go into this business.’” But it does not. It says they should have said (not asked) “If the Lord wills.” That means they should have not boasted about the future when they did not know what it is. To claim to know what one does not know (God's unrevealed providential plans for our future) is called arrogant boasting and is condemned. They were free to decide to travel and start a business, but they were not free to claim to know the future outcome.

If we make PWsFG normative, specific revelation about our plans and the future when in fact these things are unknown and unrevealed, we boast about what we do not know. We are much better off saying “I do not know” or “If the Lord wills” than claiming God's endorsement of our plans based on supposed personal revelations. We

are safe to make plans that fit within the realm of Christian liberty and know that God will use even our decisions to bring about His purposes in our lives.

CONCLUSION

God never binds people to error or uncertainty. Only inerrant, authoritative, special revelation is binding on all Christians. The only “words from God” that fit that criteria are those found in Scripture. It is abusive to make PWsFG to be special revelations of God’s will either to an individual or to a church. These “words” never have the quality of being “certainly from God.” When we take them to be that when they are not, then we have become false prophets to our own selves or to the church.

God has been ruling only providentially (rather than directly through infallible prophets) for over 2000 years and not giving further infallible, special revelation. God could raise up infallible prophets and apostles that meet the criteria of Deuteronomy 18 and 13, but He has not. Rather than seeking to make errant “words from God” authoritative and binding, we would be better off admitting God has not raised up any infallible prophets and accepting His benevolent providential rule. We are safe in God’s loving, providential care and are not “missing God” by failing to follow PWsFG that fail the necessary tests for being God’s authoritative revelations.

END NOTES

1. Any good systematic theology book contains a discussion of general revelation and special revelation. For example, Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1932 – 1996 combined ed.) 128 – 137. Also, sometimes one hears the phrase “specific revelation” which means the same thing as special revelation.
2. Issue 97 <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue97.htm>
3. See his book *Running Against the Wind* available here <http://www.onetruthministries.com/>
4. This is different than the case of the weak conscience discussed in Romans 14. The person who is “weak” and eats only vegetables because of that, is not bound by a special revelation from God, but by his own conscience. That conscience can become better informed by the Word of God and may grow stronger. But a “word from God” about eating vegetables cannot “grow” because if deemed to be from God, who cannot lie, that “word” never changes.
5. See the two articles in Issue 95: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue95.htm> and <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue95b.htm>
6. See chapter 4 of *Redefining Christianity* by Bob DeWaay that discusses the problems with religious oaths.
7. One of the more egregious examples of this reasoning is found in Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Broadman and Holman: Nashville, 1994).
8. Other references are IMaccabees 9:27; and 14:41. These are not scripture, but part of Jewish history. They are often cited as evidence for the uniqueness of the canon and that the apocrypha is not the product of inspired prophets.
9. I wrote an article about this section of Scripture that discusses what it means to be “led by the Spirit”: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue76.htm>
10. See Gary T. Meadors, *Decision Making God’s Way – A New Model for Knowing God’s Will*; (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2003) for an excellent description of this approach to decision making.

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