



# DISCERNING SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: ASSESSING CURRENT APPROACHES FOR UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WILL

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## Introduction

One of the greatest challenges facing high school students is making difficult decisions that will significantly impact their future. They must decide about dating practices, which college or vocational school to attend, what program of study to pursue, which career path to follow, and more. The decision-making process becomes more critical over the next several years as they are faced with choices about marriage, graduate programs, specific job opportunities, and/or relocation to a new area. To make matters more difficult, the number of possibilities in each of these areas has multiplied in recent years. Barry Schwartz, a professor of psychology at Swarthmore College, argues that those in affluent countries often suffer from “choice overload” which results in a decreased sense of well-being (2005). In its more extreme form, Schwartz documents how such a bewildering number of choices can lead to depression and even suicide. More commonly, choice overload causes confusion, anxiety, and decision-making paralysis (2005, pp. 201ff.).

The discernment process becomes more complicated for Christian youth who desire to make choices that are in accordance with God's will. Not only are they confronted with a multitude of choices, these students have the added burden of determining whether or not their choices align with God's plan or purpose for their lives. The vast majority of Christian students are quite open to God's direction in their lives but often confused about how to discern what precisely God would have them do. Thus a major responsibility for those who work with these students is to equip them to think through key principles for spiritual discernment and decision making.

Ironically, the multitude of resources—books, articles,

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sermons, blogs, and more—on the topic of “knowing God’s will” tends to increase the level of confusion. Not only are these resources legion, thereby resulting in another case of “choice overload,” but they also dispense contradictory advice. How is one to assess and select resources on discernment? What key principles should the Christian educator emphasize when teaching about the decision-making process? The purpose of this article is to provide clarification on the subject by (1) explaining the major approaches to spiritual discernment currently being advocated, (2) identifying which decision-making factors are most important to specific groups of Christians, and (3) offering some guidelines to employ when teaching about spiritual discernment and Christian decision making.

### **Major Approaches to Spiritual Discernment**

Garry Friesen has shed significant light on the approaches to spiritual discernment through the original (1980) and revised (2004) editions of his book, *Decision Making and the Will of God*. Friesen identifies two primary schools of thought for making decisions that are in accordance with God’s will: the “bull’s-eye” approach and the “wisdom” approach. He also notes that some Christian writers draw from both of these perspectives to form a synthesized approach. The following descriptions build on Friesen’s work while incorporating some modifications and explanations of the key theological underpinnings that influence each school of thought.

#### **Bull’s-Eye Approach**

One of the more popular approaches, the “bull’s-eye” approach (which Friesen also refers to as the “Traditional View”), theorizes that God has a perfect detailed plan for all individuals and seeks to reveal that plan to them. Some proponents of this approach include Jerry Glisson (1986), M. Blaine Smith (1991), Charles Stanley (1995), Tim LaHaye (2001), Robert Jeffress (2002), Benny Hinn (2003), Ray Pritchard (2004), Karen Henein (2006), and Gloria Copeland (2008). This school of thought has also been described as the “blueprint” or “dot” approach. Despite the various appellations, the objective for this approach remains the same: discover God’s detailed plan and then follow it. While God may permit Christians to stray from the “perfect” plan for their lives, they are not able to stray beyond the so-called “permissive” will of God. The goal, however, is for Christians to hit the bull’s-eye of God’s will or plan for their lives by making the right decisions that are gradually revealed to them by God. To determine the “right” choice between seemingly good options, these Christians pray for specific guidance or answers from God. In so doing, a central part of their prayer life functions much like a spiritual GPS device. Confirmation of

the correct choice may come intuitively, sometimes described as an “inner peace” granted by the Holy Spirit. At other times, the answer may be confirmed through an external sign or perhaps a combination of the two. Those belonging to this school of thought tend to be more open to unmediated divine intervention or direction. Advocates of the bull’s-eye approach often prescribe a specific set of decision-making steps or guidelines which can become a type of formula for finding God’s perfect will for their lives.

### **Wisdom Approach**

A second approach, the “way of wisdom,” advocates a decision-making process that does not look for detailed unmediated direction from God. Rather, Christians should rely extensively on their God-given reasoning abilities, wise counsel, and a clear assessment of their strengths, talents, and abilities. Though Friesen identifies only one wisdom approach, two distinct variations exist within this larger school of thought. One group, the one that Friesen himself advocates, emphasizes the role of the Bible as the primary wisdom guidebook. The other group emphasizes more of a pragmatic Christian wisdom in which the Bible is understood as one of the secondary factors of the spiritual discernment process.

**Biblical Wisdom Emphasis:** According to those who advocate a biblical wisdom approach to spiritual discernment, Christians should make decisions based primarily on the guidelines revealed in the Bible, their one truly dependable source of God’s revelation. This school of thought also emphasizes the rational aspect of the decision-making process, highlighting the importance of wise counsel, common sense, and responsible use of individual gifts, talents, and abilities. Some within this camp believe that God has a detailed plan for each individual but normally chooses not to reveal the details of that plan (MacArthur, 1977; Waltke, 1995; Swindoll, 2001; Warren, 2002; Swindoll and Zuck, 2003, pp. 259-267; Piper, 2004; and Stanley, 2004). Most of these proponents tend to emphasize God’s complete sovereignty through which all things have been predestined by God. Though their decisions and actions may be divinely predetermined, proponents of this approach argue that God has nevertheless established the Scriptures together with our reasoning abilities as the primary means for us to navigate our course in this life. Others who advocate the biblical wisdom approach still affirm God’s sovereignty, but they believe that God does not have a detailed plan for each individual (Sittser, 2000; Friesen 2004; and Fitzgerald, 2007). Thus, people are able to make a wide range of choices freely within God’s larger sovereign plan. With or without a detailed plan in place, the biblical wisdom

approach encourages Christians to focus their efforts on interpreting and following the direction provided in the Bible aided primarily by rational strategic thinking.

Some have compared the biblical wisdom approach to the charge given to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Before God leaves them, they receive instructions containing both prohibitions and duties. They then have the responsibility of making their own decisions. In a similar manner, God has provided us with instructions mediated through the canon of Scriptures. Though we, like Adam and Eve, may choose unwisely, God has graciously granted us the ability to make rationale decisions in line with the biblical commandments and principles.

**Pragmatic Christian Wisdom Emphasis:** Another group within the wisdom school of thought prioritizes the use of wise counsel and common sense as well as the responsible use of their strengths, talents, and abilities, but these Christians place less of a priority on the Scriptures. The Bible informs the decision-making process, but its specific instructions and commandments are counterbalanced by other factors. The Scriptures thereby function as historically significant revelation that may be superseded by accumulated knowledge and thought within the Christian community. Flora Keshgegian, for example, views the biblical metaphors related to God's will as more relevant to those in earlier societies than to our present society. As a result, she finds that post-biblical metaphors are more useful to our present culture for understanding the nature of God's will (2008). While prayer for wisdom is still highly valued, pragmatism is the guiding principle of spiritual discernment (Keshgegian, 2008, p. 25).

Those with a pragmatic Christian emphasis, like their biblical wisdom counterparts, seek to follow God's general will as opposed to a particular plan for their lives. Most within this camp do not believe that God has a detailed plan for each individual. Thus, Christians have no need to seek specific guidance or answers from God. Instead we should simply make choices based on how these decisions accord with our understanding of God's general will. Michael Halleen, for example, advises his readers to avoid looking for detailed direction from God for specific circumstances. Halleen explains that the will of God has a general focus that Jesus clarifies through his teachings: "God's will is that we should treat people as we ourselves would like to be treated in a similar situation" (2008). The emphasis for Christians thereby shifts from seeking detailed guidance from God to focusing on the kind of people we are in the midst of specific situations. We are to be the kind of people who practice the "Golden Rule" in all circumstances.

## Relationship-Formation Approach

A third school of thought, growing in popularity, argues that while God may not have a detailed plan for each person, God is nevertheless actively involved in the world and the decisions people make (Willard, 1993; Smith, 1997; McLaren, 2002; Lake, 2004; Main, 2007). Though Friesen refers to this approach as merely a synthesis of the two other schools of thought, the relationship-formation path to discernment is not a mere combination. This approach has its own distinctiveness through its emphasis on an intimate relationship with God and its stress on formation in Christ. The proponents of this approach believe that Christians have a great amount of freedom because God has not predetermined a specific path for their lives. These truly free decisions are to be born out of a deep and maturing relationship with Christ. Spiritual formation takes precedence over spiritual formulas. The Scriptures are a key component of formation, but decisions are based on our relationship with God and how God is at work in our lives. The continuing character formation in Christ then impacts the types of decisions that Christians make (cf. Talbert, 2004). God may call a person to a certain task or vocation, but God is most pleased when this person grows into Christian maturity and becomes comfortable taking responsibility for making godly decisions within the framework of an intimate divine-human relationship.

Instead of the Garden of Eden analogy, two different analogies illustrate the role of Christians who follow this approach. The first comparison is that of sheep in relationship with their shepherd. God, the Shepherd, provides continuing guidance and interacts with the sheep but does not dictate their every move. The sheep may freely graze within a large area. They may even resist the guidance of the Shepherd and wander astray. One caveat: though not always wise, these are intelligent sheep. They are capable of growing in knowledge and making responsible decisions that comport well with the Shepherd's intentions for people and the world.

The second analogy, a parent's healthy relationship with a young adult child, highlights the decision-making capability that Christians possess. God is neither a spiritual helicopter parent who makes all of our decisions for us (as in the bull's-eye approach) nor a distant parent who leaves us with only a set of directions or principles to follow (as in the wisdom approach). God neither hovers over us nor abandons us. Rather, God encourages Christians to grow in maturity and become capable of making responsible decisions. This is the type of relationship that God intends for us. Other relationships are either dysfunctional or deficient (McLaren, 2002; Lake, 2004, pp. 92-98, 111-119). At times, God may prompt

us to move in one direction or another, but God does not have a predetermined path for us to discover and follow.

### **Spiritual Discernment Practices**

Although much has been written on the topic of “knowing God’s will,” not as much has been done to study the specific factors on which Christians depend as they seek guidance from God and make decisions that they believe to be in accordance with the will of God. Of the recent studies that have added to our basic knowledge about how people in the United States view God, one of the more significant projects was conducted by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion (Bader et al., 2006). Phil Schwadel and Christian Smith conducted a major survey of Protestant teenagers that measured the impact of their religious practices (religiosity) on behavior (2005). A number of other studies have similarly focused on the effects of religiosity on certain types of behavior (Smith, 2003; Merrill, Folsom, and Christopherson, 2005; Barkan, 2006; Lam, 2006; Stack and Kposowa, 2006; Michalak, Trocki, and Bond, 2007). None of these studies, however, explores how theological understandings influence the ways in which Christians seek to discern God’s will for their lives. Stuart W. Scott conducted a survey designed to study specifics about Christian discernment processes, but his small number of survey participants (55) from one primary faith tradition limits the value of his findings (1996).

Although such studies do little to advance our knowledge of spiritual discernment practices, a recent study has provided some concrete evidence which helps to identify the decision-making factors and related theological underpinnings that are most important to different groups of Christians. The project, *A National Survey of Ministry Students—2007*, targeted ministry students attending Christian undergraduate and graduate programs. The respondents consisted of 2,604 students from 35 different schools located in the United States (and one in Canada). The participating schools were purposely selected to acquire a wide geographic and denominational distribution of respondents. All 50 states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, and 65 different countries were designated as the home state, territory, or country by one or more of the participants. Twenty-eight different denominations (as well as a significant percentage of “Nondenominational” and “Interdenominational” students) were identified by one or more of the respondents as their religious affiliation. One hundred sixty-three participants were international students. The survey was completed on a voluntary basis primarily through an online format (94% of the respondents) though some schools preferred to have their students complete a paper version of the survey (6% of the

respondents).

A basic description of the ministry students who completed the survey is as follows:

Classification – 582 undergraduates (22.5%), 1,759 masters level students (67.5%), 120 recent graduates of masters level programs (4.5%), 78 doctoral students (3%), and 65 others (2.5% non-degree or unspecified); Gender – 1,541 males (59%), 1,056 females (41%), 7 unspecified; Race/Ethnicity – 1,880 Caucasian (72%), 142 Black/African-American (5.5%), 93 Hispanic/Latino (3.5%), 115 Asian/Pacific Islander (4.5%), 10 American Indian/Alaskan Native (0.5%); 364 others (14%); Religious Affiliation – 402 Mainline Denomination Christians (15.5%) and 2,202 Evangelical Protestants (84.5%).

The results of this survey may have far-reaching implications beyond the survey sample. Not only are these respondents a sampling of the next generation of Christian leaders, the data may also provide an indication of the discernment practices utilized by the devout Christian laity in their churches and denominations. In addition to the collection of demographic information from the participants and identification of some important beliefs and practices, the study included 12 key questions that measured the level of importance that these students attributed to various factors for making decisions thought to be “in accordance with God’s will.” (See the appendix for a listing of these factors in the survey format.) The preference for certain factors helps to identify the primary approaches to spiritual discernment that these future Christian leaders are following. Having this knowledge then provides an informed basis for better instructing those who teach on this subject in either an academic or an ecclesial setting.

## Findings

The survey revealed that ministry students follow diverse approaches to discernment. All three of the major paths described above found adherents among the students participating in the survey. Even though respondents tended to gravitate toward a certain school of thought, most indicated a degree of appreciation for some aspects of the other approaches. Some students did, however, demonstrate a clear affinity for a particular approach to spiritual discernment while strongly deemphasizing factors valued by other approaches. All of the students placed a high priority on “praying for wisdom to make godly decisions.” Most respondents assigned a relatively low level of importance to the factor, “recognizing and responding to the needs of others” and an even lower level to “considering personal desires and interests.” Several of the other factors varied significantly, largely based on the preferred approach of the individual respondent.

**Table 1: Importance of Decision-Making Factors (Ratings and Rankings) for All Survey Participants\***

FACTORS	Total (N=2,604)
Praying for wisdom to make godly decisions	4.50 (1)
Judging the decision's consistency with the character/ethics of Jesus	4.13 (2)
Consulting the Bible	4.00 (3)
Consulting with wise counsel	3.94 (4)
Depending on a sense of inner peace from the Holy Spirit	3.67 (5)
Praying for specific guidance or answers from God	3.61 (6-8)
Using Common Sense	3.59 (6-8)
Considering the circumstances (doors/windows of opportunity)	3.56 (6-8)
Considering personal strengths, talents, gifts, and abilities	3.44 (9)
Recognizing and responding to the needs of others	3.31 (10)
Looking for signs of confirmation from God	2.73 (11)
Considering personal desires and interests	2.62 (12)
*Participants were rating the factors in response to the following question: "When making decisions about education, ministry opportunities, career choices, or other major decisions, how important <u>to you</u> are the following factors to ensure that the decision is in accordance with God's will?"	
Source: <i>A National Survey of Ministry Students—2007</i> (N=2,604). Note: The five-point scale was determined by assigning a value of five to the "Very Important" category, a value of three to "Important," one to "Somewhat Important," and zero to "Not Important." The rankings in parentheses are based on the calculated rating of the level of importance selected by the participants within each group. (Any ratings within .05 of each other are considered equal.)	

**Practitioners of the Bull's-Eye Approach:** Those that tend to follow the bull's-eye approach to discernment include a high percentage of students with charismatic tendencies as well as a significant number of less charismatic conservative Evangelicals. Both sets of these students value the importance of "praying for wisdom to make godly decisions," "judging the decision's

**Table 2: Bull's-Eye Distinguishing Factors by Religious Affiliation/ Group in Descending Order (According to Rating and Ranking)**

Religious Affiliation or Group	Composite of Bull's-Eye Factors	Praying for Specific Guidance	Inner Peace from the Holy Spirit	Looking for Signs of Confirmation
Pentecostal (n=35)	4.09 (5)	4.26 (4)	4.60 (1)	3.40 (10)
Bull's-Eye** Baptist Subset (n=265)	4.07 (6)	4.53 (3)	4.30 (5)	3.38 (9-10)
Bull's-Eye** Nondenom Subset (n=65)	4.02 (6)	4.43 (1-3)	4.28 (5)	3.34 (10)
Pro-Glossalalia Subset (n=287)	3.97 (6)	4.35 (2-5)	4.34 (2-5)	3.23 (11)
Assemblies of God (n=66)	3.91 (6)	4.23 (4)	4.52 (2)	2.97 (11)
Bull's-Eye** Methodist Subset (n=27)	3.81 (6)	4.00 (4-5)	4.22 (2-3)	3.22 (11)
Baptist (Total, n=1,059)	3.47 (7)	3.88 (5)	3.70 (6)	2.84 (11)
Seventh-day Adventist (n=50)	3.32 (7)	3.80 (4)	3.72 (5-6)	2.44 (11)
Methodist (Total, n=163)	3.30 (8)	3.23 (10)	3.83 (3)	2.85 (11)
Lutheran (ELCA) (n=179)	2.99 (8)	2.97 (9)	3.60 (3-4)	2.40 (12)
Nondenominational (Total, n=410)	3.23 (8.5)	3.66 (5-6)	3.56 (8)	2.49 (12)
Church of the Nazarene (n=77)	3.01 (8.5)	3.23 (9-10)	3.90 (4-5)	2.91 (11-12)
Mennonite Brethren (n=12)	3.31 (9)	3.42 (9)	4.17 (5)	2.33 (12)
Moderate Baptist Sample (n=83)	3.27 (9)	3.53 (9)	3.69 (5-8)	2.61 (12)
Interdenominational (n=58)	3.20 (9)	3.33 (8-10)	3.45 (6-7)	2.83 (12)
Reformed (n=60)	3.14 (9)	3.30 (9)	3.38 (8)	2.75 (11)
Presbyterian (PC-USA) (n=39)	3.06 (9)	3.03 (11)	3.72 (4-6)	2.44 (12)
Presbyterian (PCA) (n=23)	3.01 (9.5)	3.39 (7-8)	3.26 (9)	2.39 (12)
Episcopal (n=35)	2.89 (10)	2.77 (10)	3.40 (8)	2.49 (12)
Wisdom* Baptist Subset (n=145)	2.86 (10)	3.24 (8-9)	3.10 (10)	2.24 (12)
Wisdom* Nondenom Subset (n=75)	2.86 (10.5)	3.37 (9)	3.17 (10-11)	2.04 (12)
Churches of Christ (n=56)	2.51 (11)	2.51 (11)	2.88 (10)	2.14 (12)

**Source:** *A National Survey of Ministry Students* —2007 (N=2,604). **Note:** The five-point scale was determined by assigning a value of five to the “Very Important” category, a value of three to “Important,” one to “Somewhat Important,” and zero to “Not Important.” The rankings in parentheses are based on the calculated rating of the level of importance selected by the participants within each group. (Any ratings within .05 of each other are considered equal.)

\*\*“Wisdom” designates respondents who strongly agreed with the statement, “God is most concerned that I seek to follow God’s moral/general will for my life.”

\*\*\*“Bull’s-eye” designates respondents who strongly agreed with the statement, “God is most concerned that I seek to find God’s specific will for my life.”

Bible.” They also place greater emphasis than do other ministry students on the factors closely associated with the bull’s-eye school of thought: “praying for specific guidance or answers from God,” “depending on a sense of inner peace from the Holy Spirit,” and “looking for signs of confirmation from God.”

Those who designated their religious affiliation with a group open to charismatic practices rated the distinguishing factors of the bull’s-eye approach more highly than most of the other ministry students. For example, students identifying themselves as Pentecostal rated dependence on a “sense of inner peace from the Holy Spirit” as the most important factor with a rating of 4.60 (on a five-point scale), and the Assemblies of God respondents viewed this factor as the second most important with a rating of 4.52. “Praying for specific guidance or answers from God” was viewed by both of these groups as highly important (4.23-4.26), making it the fourth most important factor out of the 12 factors listed. “Looking for signs of confirmation” ranked lower, but the rating overall was still significantly higher than those with a strong affinity for the wisdom approach. The average rating and ranking of the distinguishing factors associated with the bull’s-eye approach were significantly higher for both of these charismatic groups than for most non-charismatic groups.

Moreover, the survey respondents who strongly agreed that “speaking in tongues is a gift of the Spirit that should be encouraged” (N=287) expressed a strong affinity for the bull’s-eye approach to discernment. This charismatically-inclined subset included a significant number of respondents from the two groups mentioned above, but it also included Nondenominational students and those affiliated with the Vineyard movement, the Church of God, Brethren Church, and others. They rated “a sense of inner peace from the Holy Spirit” and “praying for specific guidance” as factors on an equally high level of importance for decision-making as “consulting the Bible” and “judging the decision’s consistency with the character/ethics of Jesus.” Only one other factor – “praying for wisdom to

make godly decisions” – was rated higher. These charismatically-inclined students also valued the importance of “looking for signs of confirmation from God,” with a rating of 3.23 compared to a rating of about 2.00 for respondents who have a strong affinity for the wisdom approach to discernment.

The Nondenominational respondents provide a clear example of the charismatic influence on the ways in which Christians seek guidance from God: those who seek to place themselves in the center of God’s will by making decisions based on specific guidance from God have stronger charismatic tendencies; those who de-emphasize the bull’s-eye approach to discernment are less likely to have charismatic tendencies. Nearly 60 percent of the Nondenominational students who stressed the priority of finding and following God’s specific will (the “Bull’s-Eye Nondenominational” subset; that is, the Nondenominational students who strongly agreed with the statement, “God is most concerned that I seek to find God’s specific will for my life.”) also strongly agreed (36%) or agreed (22%) that “speaking in tongues should be encouraged.” Only 16 percent of the Nondenominational students who stressed the priority of following God’s moral/general will for their lives (the “Wisdom Nondenominational” subset; that is, the Nondenominational students who strongly agreed with the statement, “God is most concerned that I follow God’s moral/general will for my life.”) either strongly agreed (10.7%) or agreed (5.3%) that “speaking in tongues should be encouraged.”

A number of non-charismatic Christians, however, do follow the bull’s-eye approach to discernment. Each of the denominations represented in the survey including mainline denominations have some ministry students attracted to this school of thought. Of the total number of participants, 19 percent (501 out of the 2,604) strongly agreed with the statement, “God is most concerned that I seek to find God’s specific will for my life.” For these students, “praying for specific guidance or answers from God” was one of the most important factors for making decisions in accordance with God’s will. This factor was the second most important of the twelve with a rating of 4.41 and equally valued with “consulting the Bible.” They also emphasized the importance of “depending on a sense of inner peace from the Holy Spirit” (4.33) and matched the value given by the Pentecostal participants to the factor of “looking for signs of confirmation from God” (3.42 and 3.40 respectively). Of note, only 36 percent of this 501 student subset either strongly agreed (20%) or agreed (16%) that “speaking in tongues should be encouraged.” Over half of the bull’s-eye subset were Baptists (N=265) representing 25 percent of all the Baptist participants. Other traditionally non-charismatic denominations with a significant percentage of

**Table 3: Wisdom School Distinguishing Factors by Religious Affiliation/Group in Descending Order (According to Rating and Ranking)**

Religious Affiliation or Group	Composite of Wisdom Factors	Consulting Wise Counsel	Using Common Sense	Considering Personal Strengths, Talents, Gifts, and Abilities
Mennonite Brethren (n=12)	4.28 (4)	4.50 (1-2)	4.00 (6-7)	4.33 (3-4)
Churches of Christ (n=56)	4.04 (4)	4.34 (2)	3.70 (6)	4.07 (3-4)
Episcopal (n=35)	3.89 (4)	4.20 (2)	3.69 (6)	3.77 (4-5)
Presbyterian (PC-USA) (n=39)	3.77 (4)	3.92 (2)	3.69 (4-6)	3.69 (4-6)
Inter-denominational (n=58)	3.71 (4)	4.07 (1-2)	3.62 (4-5)	3.45 (6-7)
Lutheran (ELCA) (n=179)	3.64 (4)	3.55 (3-6)	3.52 (4-7)	3.86 (2)
Wisdom* Nondenom Subset (n=75)	4.02 (5)	4.27 (3-4)	4.12 (5)	3.68 (7-8)
Church of the Nazarene (n=77)	3.88 (5)	4.19 (3)	3.90 (4-5)	3.56 (8)
Moderate Baptist Sample (n=83)	3.86 (5)	4.14 (3)	3.78 (4)	3.67 (6-8)
Wisdom* Baptist Subset (n=145)	3.76 (5)	4.09 (4)	3.76 (5)	3.43 (6)
Reformed (n=60)	3.71 (5)	4.07 (3-4)	3.48 (6-7)	3.58 (5)
Presbyterian (PCA) (n=23)	3.67 (5)	3.96 (3)	3.48 (6-7)	3.62 (4-5)
Methodist (Total, n=163)	3.61 (5)	3.68 (4)	3.53 (7)	3.62 (5)
Non-denominational (Total, n=410)	3.71 (7)	4.04 (4)	3.61 (7)	3.47 (9)
Pentecostal (n=35)	3.79 (7)	4.03 (6)	3.71 (7)	3.63 (8)
Baptist (Total, n=1,059)	3.57 (7)	3.97 (4)	3.54 (7)	3.21 (9-10)
Seventh-day Adventist (n=50)	3.52 (7)	3.64 (7)	3.72 (5-6)	3.22 (9)
Pro-Glossalalia Subset (n=287)	3.67 (8)	4.02 (6)	3.63 (8)	3.37 (10)

Bull's-Eye** Nondenom Subset (n=65)	3.61 (8)	3.86 (7)	3.46 (8-9)	3.51 (8-9)
Assemblies of God (n=66)	3.58 (8)	3.83 (6-7)	3.73 (8)	3.17 (10)
Bull's-Eye** Methodist Subset (n=27)	3.54 (8)	3.59 (8)	3.67 (7)	3.37 (9-10)
Bull's-Eye** Baptist Subset (n=265)	3.53 (9)	3.98 (6)	3.41 (9-10)	3.20 (11)

**Source:** *A National Survey of Ministry Students — 2007* (N=2,604). **Note:** The five-point scale was determined by assigning a value of five to the “Very Important” category, a value of three to “Important,” one to “Somewhat Important,” and zero to “Not Important.” The rankings in parentheses are based on the calculated rating of the level of importance selected by the participants within each group. (Any ratings within .05 of each other are considered equal.)

\*\*“Wisdom” designates respondents who strongly agreed with the statement, “God is most concerned that I seek to follow God’s moral/general will for my life.”

\*\*“Bull’s-eye” designates respondents who strongly agreed with the statement, “God is most concerned that I seek to find God’s specific will for my life.”

respondents having an affinity with the bull’s-eye approach included Seventh-day Adventists (18%) and Methodists (17%).

**Practitioners of the Wisdom Approach:** Most ministry students value the distinguishing factors associated with the wisdom approach: “consulting wise counsel,” “using common sense,” and “considering personal strengths, talents, gifts, and abilities.” The range for the composite ratings of the wisdom factors by the various groups is much closer (3.52-4.28) than the range for the composite ratings of the bull’s-eye factors (2.51-4.17). Thus, while those who follow the bull’s-eye approach have a healthy appreciation for the wisdom factors in the discernment process, those students who prioritize the wisdom factors (i.e., those groups with a composite wisdom factor ranking of four or five) have little appreciation for the bull’s-eye school of thought.

The primary groups that prioritize the wisdom approach to discernment include most mainline denominations, the Churches of Christ, Reformed/Presbyterian students, Interdenominational, and significant subsets of Nondenominational and Baptist students. Not only do these ministry students emphasize God’s general/moral will over a specific will of God, they also place less importance on direct divine intervention in their lives. Among these groups, the factor of “praying for specific guidance or answers” ranges from 2.51 (Churches of Christ) to 3.39 (Presbyterian—PCA), and the level

of importance attributed to “a sense of inner peace from the Holy Spirit” ranges from 2.88 (Churches of Christ) to 3.72 (PC-USA). By contrast, those groups who follow the bull’s-eye approach rate these same discernment factors at 4.00 and above.

Among those groups who prioritize the wisdom factors for spiritual discernment while deemphasizing specific guidance from God, some place a significantly higher emphasis on the importance of the Bible as a decision-making factor than do others (See Table 4). Given the priority placed on the Scriptures, the groups either distinguish themselves as those following more of a biblical wisdom approach or those gravitating toward a pragmatic Christian wisdom approach to discernment. Both sets of ministry students place highest importance on the factor of praying to God for wisdom to make godly decisions. Both sets assign great importance and priority to the individual wisdom factors. The central difference is that some ministry students prioritize the role of the Bible in the decision-making process.

Given the criteria above, the groups that fall within the biblical wisdom approach include subsets of Nondenominational and Baptist ministry students and those who identify their religious affiliation as Reformed, conservative Presbyterian (PCA), and Interdenominational. All of these groups emphasize the factors associated with the wisdom approach over those factors associated with the bull’s-eye approach. While the latter three groups do not have as strong an emphasis on the Bible as the Nondenominational and Baptist students following the wisdom approach, these latter three groups still rate the Bible factor highly (Reformed = 4.05; PCA Presbyterian = 3.70; and, Interdenominational = 3.66) with a resultant ranking varying between three and five.

The subsets of Nondenominational and Baptist participants who emphasize following the general will of God provide the clearest examples of those with a strong affinity for the biblical wisdom approach to discernment. These Nondenominational (N=75) and Baptists (N=145) deemphasize the bull’s-eye approach (an average composite rating for both groups of 2.86 and ranking in the lowest quartile) while prioritizing the wisdom approach to discernment (with a composite ranking of 5 out of 12 for the wisdom factors). These students also view guidance from the Bible as the second most important factor in the decision-making process with a high rating of 4.48 for the Baptists and 4.39 for the Nondenominational.

Wisdom school adherents that make up the pragmatic branch include Episcopalian, Lutheran (ELCA), Presbyterian (PC-USA), and Church of Christ respondents. Like their biblical wisdom counterparts, these four groups place great value on the distinguish-

**Table 4: Biblical Emphasis (in Descending Order of Rating) for Groups with a Priority on Wisdom Factors**

Religious Affiliation or Group	Consulting the Bible	Composite of Wisdom Factors
Wisdom* Baptist Subset (n=145)	4.48 (2)	3.76 (5)
Wisdom* Nondenom Subset (n=75)	4.39 (2)	4.02 (5)
Reformed (n=60)	4.05 (3-4)	3.71 (5)
Presbyterian (PCA) (n=23)	3.70 (4)	3.67 (5)
Interdenominational (n=58)	3.66 (4-5)	3.71 (4)
Presbyterian (PC-USA) (n=39)	3.44 (8)	3.77 (4)
Churches of Christ (n=56)	3.14 (8)	4.04 (4)
Episcopal (n=35)	2.94 (9)	3.89 (4)
Lutheran (ELCA) (n=179)	2.74 (10)	3.64 (4)

**Source:** *A National Survey of Ministry Students—2007* (N=2,604).  
**Note:** The five-point scale was determined by assigning a value of five to the “Very Important” category, a value of three to “Important,” one to “Somewhat Important,” and zero to “Not Important.” The rankings in parentheses are based on the calculated rating of the level of importance selected by the participants within each group. (Any ratings within .05 of each other are considered equal.)

\*“Wisdom” designates respondents who strongly agreed with the statement, “God is most concerned that I seek to follow God’s moral/general will for my life.”

ing factors associated with the wisdom school of thought while deemphasizing the factors typically associated with the bull’s-eye approach. They do not, however, rate the Scriptures as important a factor for decision-making as do those following the biblical wisdom approach. Instead of being one of the top factors in the discernment process, “consulting the Bible” receives a comparatively low rating with a resultant ranking in the third or fourth quartiles. (Note: the Church of Christ participants were largely from schools that would be considered less conservative; Church of Christ students from more conservative schools would likely place a higher priority on the factor of “consulting the Bible” and thereby adhere more closely to a biblical wisdom approach.)

**Practitioners of the Relationship-Formation Approach:** The survey participants with the strongest affinity for the relationship-formation approach include Methodists, Church of the Nazarene respondents, Mennonite Brethren, and moderate Baptists. All of these groups have a high appreciation for the wisdom factors, but they still make significant allowance for intervention and guidance by the Holy Spirit in the decision-making process. They also emphasize the importance of “judging the decision’s consistency with the character/ethics of Jesus.” These groups seem to strive for a balance between the head and heart—the rationale and the intuitive—with less emphasis on seeking specific answers or signs of confirmation from God. While the Scriptures may be one of the more important factors, guidance from the Bible does not supersede the interpretive hub of Jesus’ character and ethics. The Nazarene and moderate Baptist ministry students, for example, valued the factor of “judging the decision in light of the character/ethics of Jesus” as highly as the top decision-making factor (“praying for wisdom to make godly decisions”). The distinguishing factors of the wisdom approach receive strong consideration with an average ranking of five for these groups. Nevertheless, they also emphasize the importance of “depending on a sense of inner peace from the Holy Spirit,” with all four groups having a relatively high rating (3.69-4.17) and a resulting rank within the second quartile of factors. The areas that have less importance include “praying for specific guidance or answers from God” (3.53 and below) and “looking for signs of confirmation from God” (2.92 and below) with both of these in or immediately adjacent to the lowest quartile of the twelve factors.

Though the ministry students affiliated with the Churches of Christ and the subsets of biblical wisdom Baptists and Nondenominationalists do not emphasize a strong discernment role of the Spirit, a number of the mainline students do show an openness to the influence of the Holy Spirit. The mainline Lutherans (ELCA), Presbyterians (PC-USA), and Methodists, for example, attribute a significant level of importance to the factor of “inner peace from the Holy Spirit.” This may, however, be attributed in part to a higher percentage of female respondents within these groups. The female survey participants overall rated this factor more highly (3.98 with a resulting rank of 3) than did the male participants (3.45 and a ranking of 7-8). Mainline Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists had significantly higher percentages of female respondents (54-60% female) than the Churches of Christ group of respondents (25% female) and the Baptist and Nondenominational subsets of the biblical wisdom approach (13% female). Thus, the survey also indicates that female ministry students affiliated with mainline

**Table 5: Relationship-Formation Distinguishing Factors in Descending Order with Low Priority on Specific Guidance (According to Rating and Ranking)**

Religious Affiliation or Group	Composite of Relationship-Formation Factors	Inner Peace from the Holy Spirit	Consistency with the Character/Ethics of Jesus	Praying for Specific Guidance (Low Priority)
Methodist (Total, n=163)	4.00 (2.5)	3.83 (3)	4.16 (2)	3.23 (10)
Church of the Nazarene (n=77)	4.15 (3)	3.90 (4-5)	4.40 (1-2)	3.23 (9-10)
Mennonite Brethren (n=12)	4.25 (4)	4.17 (5)	4.33 (3-4)	3.42 (9)
Moderate Baptist Sample (n=83)	4.06 (4)	3.69 (5-8)	4.43 (1-2)	3.53 (9)
Presbyterian (PC-USA) (n=39)	3.77 (4)	3.72 (4-6)	3.81 (3)	3.03 (11)
Reformed (n=60)	3.88 (5)	3.38 (8)	4.37 (1-2)	3.30 (9)
Inter-denominational (n=58)	3.68 (5)	3.45 (6-7)	3.91 (3)	3.33 (8-10)
Episcopal (n=35)	3.75 (5.5)	3.40 (8)	4.09 (3)	2.77 (10)
Presbyterian (PCA) (n=23)	3.74 (5.5)	3.26 (9)	4.22 (2)	3.39 (7-8)
Lutheran (ELCA) (n=179)	3.33 (6)	3.60 (3-4)	3.05 (8)	2.97 (9)
Wisdom* Baptist (Subset, n=145)	3.70 (6.5)	3.10 (10)	4.30 (3)	3.24 (8-9)
Wisdom* Nondenom Subset (n=75)	3.70 (7)	3.17 (10-11)	4.22 (3-4)	3.37 (9)
Churches of Christ (n=56)	3.50 (7)	2.88 (10)	4.11 (3-4)	2.51 (11)

denominations are more likely to practice a relationship-formation approach to discernment than a strict pragmatic wisdom approach.

### Conclusions Based on the Survey Data

Despite the efforts by Friesen and others to discourage Christians from following the bull's-eye approach to discernment, the desire to be in the center of God's perfect will by seeking specific guidance from God is popular among many Christian ministry students. Based on the survey data, this approach is most prevalent

among ministry students with charismatic tendencies as well as many conservative non-charismatic respondents. If these students retain their adherence to this form of spiritual discernment as they take leadership positions within churches and parachurch organizations, their teaching on this topic will likely contribute to its continued popularity within their spheres of influence for some years to come.

The biblical wisdom approach is gaining more adherents largely due to those like Friesen, Piper, and others who are strongly advocating this path to discernment. Friesen's book, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, has been particularly influential having sold more than 250,000 copies. In fact, several of the survey participants mentioned Friesen's book in the comments section at the end of the survey. Those with a stronger affinity for Calvinism (conservative Presbyterians, Reformed, and Calvinistic segments of Nondenominationals and Baptists) are most likely to be attracted to this approach. The survey results confirm that adherents of the biblical wisdom approach do not concern themselves as much with seeking specific guidance from the Holy Spirit. Rather, the commands and principles within the Bible provide the primary basis for making decisions in conjunction with God-given reasoning abilities and wise counsel.

Most of the respondents belonging to mainline denominations or the more moderate branch of the Churches of Christ also prioritize the components of the wisdom approach; they simply place less emphasis on the Scriptures than do their biblical wisdom counterparts. Students affiliated with mainline denominations have a greater openness to the directive role of the Spirit than the Churches of Christ respondents. Because the Methodist participants place a high level of importance on the role of the Spirit as well as judging decisions based on their consistency with the character/ethics of Jesus, these students gravitate more toward the relationship-formation approach than the pragmatic wisdom approach.

The survey participants who indicated the strongest affinity for the relationship-formation approach include Methodists, Church of the Nazarene respondents, Mennonite Brethren, and moderate Baptists. Nondenominational respondents identified most with either the bull's-eye approach or the biblical wisdom approach, but some Nondenominational survey participants do seem to resonate with the relationship-formation school of thought. Female respondents affiliated with mainline denominations are more likely to have an affinity for the relationship-formation approach than are their male counterparts. Because the relationship-formation approach receives much of its recent impetus from the teachings of emergent church leaders like Brian McLaren, this approach has the potential of expanding as these types of leaders expand their influence.

Overall, the survey indicates that ministry students are serious about their desire to live their lives in accordance with God's will. The concept of "God's will," however, varies from one group to the other. For those that believe that God has both a general and specific will for people, one perspective usually receives priority over the other. Christians tend to gravitate toward one particular approach to spiritual discernment, but most ministry students have a significant level of appreciation for a majority of the factors listed on the survey, especially those associated with the wisdom school of thought. Some overlapping of the approaches is not unreasonable given the biblical examples that can be cited to support each approach. We can be thankful that these students are serious about seeking God's guidance and pray that God will bless their efforts as they seek to live their lives in accordance to God's will.

### **Recommendations For Pedagogy**

Despite the fact that God may choose to work through various methods to guide believers in their decision making, Christian educators have an important responsibility to provide a deeper understanding of the discernment process and to help alleviate some of the potential weaknesses associated with the different practices being used to make decisions. What follows are some teaching strategies that have proven effective for helping Christians develop greater clarity about spiritual discernment and identify some of the potential pitfalls related to the various approaches. These recommendations may include particular theological presuppositions that differ from the reader but are offered here as talking points for further discussion.

1. Use the "Decision-Making Factors Survey" in the appendix to learn which factors the students/youth currently view as the most important. The survey factors then become an effective pedagogical tool, serving as a springboard into a discussion about the pros and cons of each factor. For example, two of the factors that are usually considered least important ("considering personal desires and interests" and "recognizing and responding to the needs of others") are the two items that Frederick Beuchner identifies as instrumental for vocational discernment: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (1973, p. 95). A discussion of these factors usually enables the students to delineate between self-centered desires and God-given desires/interests. It also creates an opportunity to teach how Jesus met the needs of those around him and how Christians, as they make choices about vocation and ministry opportunities, need to avoid the sin of omission (James 4:17) by being sensitive to the deep needs of those in both the local and global communities.

2. Provide an overview of the discernment landscape so the students will be able to visualize the ways in which Christians have sought and are seeking guidance from God. With a better understanding of the major approaches, the youth can better understand the pros and cons of each approach as well as their theological underpinnings. The view of God's sovereignty proves central to the perspectives for discerning God's will. Does God have a detailed plan (specific vocation, spouse, etc.) for each individual? If so, does God choose to reveal this plan? Does human free will play a role in the decisions we make? Or, are these decisions predetermined?

3. Help students gain a healthy appreciation for the wisdom factors. Though nearly all of the survey participants held the wisdom components in high regard, some exceptions did surface on the undergraduate level. This phenomenon is more prevalent among first- and second-year students. Many of these younger ministry students placed less value on two of these factors: "using common sense" and "considering personal strengths, talents, gifts, and abilities." Based on statements in the comments section of the survey along with anecdotal evidence, these students are likely concluding that God's greatest actions run counter to human reasoning and/or occur in an area beyond their personal strengths and abilities. In so doing, these students are identifying with Tertullian's position that Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens, that faith has nothing to do with reason. Nevertheless, God does advise us to make strategic plans and use our talents responsibly.

Though most survey participants recognized the importance of wise counsel, this factor still deserves attention when teaching youth about its role in the decision-making process. Because youth are in the process of establishing their independence, they may tend to neglect or even avoid advice from their parents or other parental type counselors. Instead they often look to their peers and other relatively young advisors. Or, they may decide to be their own wise counsel. This tendency is commonly reinforced by an inflated view of their personal knowledge and decision-making ability.

Wise counsel comes in different forms: those with knowledge or expertise in a particular area, those with spiritual maturity and wisdom, trusted individuals or groups, as well as worthwhile books, articles, and blogs. As Solomon's son Rehoboam discovered too late, the key is to learn how to distinguish between trustworthy counsel and bad advice. Because the consequences of the advice taken can have far-reaching effects, the lesson about choosing wisely between different sources of counsel is well worth the time of its teaching.

4. Help those who prioritize the wisdom factors gain some

appreciation for the intuitive aspects of discernment, for the Spirit to be at work in their lives. Strong advocates of the biblical wisdom approach often speak disparagingly about the ones who depend on the Holy Spirit for guidance. Stuart W. Scott, for example, refers to intuitive discernment as being inferior due to its subjectivity. He naively refers to his the biblical wisdom approach as objective and thereby preferable to other methods. Because “intrinsic” approaches, according to Scott, depend on personal experience, “anything goes, inconsistency is tolerated, and confusion often results” (1996, p. 33). At one point, Scott even discourages the use of prayer as a means of guidance due to its potential for subjectivity (1996, p. 82). Others are equally suspicious about any mystical promptings by the Spirit or anything beyond what is revealed in the Bible (e.g., DeWaay, 2008 and Jentoft, 2008).

While the Bible serves as our guidebook, Christians still need to realize that all interpretations have a subjective element. Moreover, the Bible itself contains multiple exhortations to make room for the Holy Spirit to be at work in our lives (e.g., Galatians 5:16-18). We need to be careful to avoid what Dallas Willard calls “Bible deism” (1993, p. 110); that is, God provides Christians with a Bible and has little, if any, individualized communication with us after that point (Willard, 1993, p. 111). Though some Christians go to extremes and attribute to God more than they ought, our reaction should not be to dispense with the Spirit altogether. Bruce Main rightly speaks about the crucial role that the Spirit plays in the discernment process, often resulting in courageous deeds that bring honor to God and further God’s kingdom (2007, pp. 15ff).

5. Encourage the followers of the pragmatic wisdom approach to retain the relevance of the Scriptures. These Christians are less likely than the biblical wisdom adherents to exorcise the Spirit from the discernment process, but they do have the strong potential for suppressing the continuing relevance of the Bible. Keshkegian, for instance, views nearly all of the biblical metaphors for God as outdated. The metaphor she substitutes is that of life-giving energy. God as such is not personal. God neither has a specific will nor (much of) a general will. The primary lesson for discernment is that our decisions should be conducive of this divine energy (2008, pp. 154-161). By distancing herself so dramatically from the Scriptures, Keshkegian’s eventual view of God has much more in common with Brahman, the impersonal deity of Hinduism, than with the personal God of Christianity. The Scriptures may need a healthy hermeneutic to keep the messages relevant, but the truths within the Bible have no need to be replaced with beliefs from other religions.

6. Help the relationship-formation adherents practice

humility in their relationship with God. This approach, like the pragmatic wisdom approach, maximizes the human role in the decision-making process. While God may desire for Christians to grow in maturity and take greater responsibility for our decisions, maturity does not instantly appear. This formation process takes time, and even mature Christians remain fallible humans with a superb ability to rationalize whatever they are doing. A strong reverence for God and proper respect for the Scriptures can help counter the temptation to justify our own self-centered agendas.

7. Encourage spiritual formation for all. In recent years, the practice of spiritual disciplines has moved beyond Catholic circles and has been embraced by many Evangelical Christians. Books by Richard Foster (1978), Dallas Willard (1990), Donald Whitney (1991), and many others have called on Christians to deepen their spiritual roots through the disciplines so that they may become mature followers who are being transformed into the image of Christ (cf. White, 2005, pp. 63-85). By becoming more like Christ, the youth/students will find that identifying decisions that are in accordance with the will of God becomes much clearer and more natural. The struggle then shifts from discernment to action, from knowing to acting upon that knowledge.

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## Appendix

### Decision-Making Factors Survey

\*When making decisions about education, ministry opportunities, career choices, or other major decisions, how important to you are the following to ensure that the decision is in accordance with God's will? (Circle the appropriate response.)

#### 1. Using common sense

Not Important      Somewhat Important      Important      Very Important

#### 2. Consulting the Bible

Not Important      Somewhat Important      Important      Very Important

#### 3. Considering the circumstances (looking for doors/windows of opportunity)

Not Important      Somewhat Important      Important      Very Important

#### 4. Depending on a sense of inner peace from the Holy Spirit

Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
<b>5. Consulting with wise counsel</b>			
Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
<b>6. Praying for wisdom to make godly decisions</b>			
Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
<b>7. Considering personal desires and interests</b>			
Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
<b>8. Looking for signs of confirmation from God</b>			
Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
<b>9. Considering personal strengths, talents, gifts, and abilities</b>			
Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
<b>10. Praying for specific guidance or answers from God</b>			
Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
<b>11. Recognizing and responding to the needs of others</b>			
Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important
<b>12. Judging the decision's consistency with the character/ethics of Jesus</b>			
Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important

*Thank you for completing the survey.*

### **Author's Note**

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DISCERNING SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: ASSESSING CURRENT APPROACHES FOR UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WILL  
Dennis J. Horton\* Introduction One of the greatest challenges facing high school students is making difficult decisions that will significantly impact their future. They must decide about dating practices, which college or vocational school to attend, what program of study to pursue, which career path to follow, and more. How is one to assess and select resources on discernment? What key principles should the Christian educator emphasize when teaching about the decision-making process? Discerning Spiritual Discernment: Assessing Current Approaches for Understanding God's Will. D.J. Horton. No Empire, No Bible?: Aspects of the Relationship between Biblical Texts and Current Anti-empire Views. C. Lombaard. A King under the Law: The Torah promulgation and its subversion in Jeremiah. Discernment is chosen as a topic around which in this way to explore the methodology of the discipline of Biblical Spirituality, expanding on the influential work of McGrath in this regard, but also linking to the recent research interest in this topic, in addition to discernment by its inherent nature being topical for the methodology and the identity of the discipline of Biblical.