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Freedom or Fortune

Discerning Paul's Basis for Ethics

BY DAVID L. MATSON

I would like to introduce you to a few of my friends. Meet, if you will, Steve and Adrienne Swarthmore. Ever since they met at Bible College, they have had plans to be missionaries. In recent years, however, Adrienne's mother has grown increasingly ill, requiring their steady attention and delaying their plans to go to Africa. Now they are beginning to wonder if they should go at all, since the doctor has given them very little hope that she will get better in the near or distant future.

Meet Dr. Richard Beasley. As president of a small liberal arts college in an obscure part of the country, he is finding it extremely difficult to raise funds for a new capital improvement campaign. Some of his administrators have begun to advise him to abort the effort, believing it to be unrealistic and a waste of resources under the current conditions. Yet he wonders if perhaps they lack sufficient vision and faith and the will to persevere, with God's help.

Meet Susan Hunt, who serves on the nursing staff of a major hospital. She has always wanted to be a doctor, but she failed to make the cut into medical school. Her minister has suggested to her that God needs well-trained nurses just as much as qualified doctors. She knows her work is important and necessary, but she finds it difficult to let go of her dream. What if she studies a little harder for the entrance exams and reapplies next year? What if she

approaches some different schools this time around? What if she asks for that letter of recommendation that she failed to request before?

Most of us, I think, recognize bits and pieces of ourselves in these composite figures of people I have known. We have all struggled at one point or another with moral and ethical discernment, with knowing God's will in a given situation. Should I take Job A instead of Job B? Should I marry now or later? Should we start another journal in a movement known more for its editors than its theologians? My wife, Mary, and I just went through a very difficult decision-making process that left us tired and exhausted. At such times we are drawn to a text like Rom 12:2:¹

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may *discern* what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.
(italics added)

So significant is this text for a discussion of Christian decision making that Richard Hays cites it as the concluding statement in his recent tome on New Testament ethics.²

But, as Gordon Fee points out, this passage is surprising both for what it says and for what it does not say.³ Let us begin with what it *does* say. The verb

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translated “discern” in the NRSV text (*dokimazo*)—variously translated “prove” (RSV, NASB, KJV), “approve” (NIV), “know” (GNB), and “discover” (Ziesler), among others—implies a responsible exercise of freedom that leads to moral insight. Its strategic placement in “this opening basic statement of the foundation of Christian ethics”⁴ suggests that it functions as a key term in Pauline ethics, despite its moderate usage in the Pauline corpus.⁵ At its heart is the idea of testing, and thus “approving,” something if the test so warrants. It is one word whose etymological meaning seems to be retained in Paul’s usage of the term. Hence the NIV attempts to capture its nuance by rendering it with a phrase: “test and approve.” The strategic use of *dokimazo* at Rom 12:2, coming on the heels of the need and results of justification (1:16–11:36), suggests that the will of God is something Christians discover only in the throes of living out their existence as God’s new eschatological people, unbound to this age. The moral imperative, which typically follows the Pauline indicative, also follows moral discovery. As C. K. Barrett points out, “The Christian finds out the will of God not to contemplate it but to do it.”⁶

But enough about what the text says. What does it *not* say? First, and rather surprisingly, Paul does not say that *scripture* provides the norm for his ethical judgments. In the sequence of Paul’s argument, Paul has already removed the Christian from the sphere of the law’s influence: “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace” (6:14). “In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ” (7:4). “For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes” (10:4). Whatever we might want to say about Paul’s

use of the Old Testament,⁷ Paul does not derive casuistic instructions from the Torah. Victor Paul Furnish has often been cited as succinctly stating the case:

It is noteworthy that Paul never quotes the Old Testament *in extenso* for the purpose of developing a pattern of conduct. Except for a few instances in which a catena of passages from several different scriptural contexts is assembled, the citations are always brief. Moreover, and even of greater significance, they are never casuistically interpreted or elaborated. . . . There is no evidence which indicates that the apostle regarded [the Old Testament] as in any sense a source book for detailed moral instruction or even a manual of ethical norms.⁸

Second, and equally surprising, is the fact that Paul does not derive his ethical norms from the teachings of Jesus.⁹ While Paul certainly knows of certain sayings of Jesus and cites them on occasion (e.g., 1 Cor 7:10; 9:14; 11:23; 1 Thess 4:15), they are in fact quite rare in Paul’s writings. In Romans there is a *possible* citation of a saying of Jesus at 14:14, where Paul is persuaded “in the Lord Jesus” that nothing is unclean in itself (cf. Mark 7:15). We are on better ground if we claim that Paul includes certain allusions to Jesus’ teachings as part of his ethical repertoire, such as his apparent reliance on Jesus’ admonition to “bless those who persecute you” at 12:14 (cf. Luke 6:27–28; Matt 5:44).¹⁰ Yet the comment of Robin Scroggs is to the point: “[W]hen all is said and done, the paucity of *explicit* citations used to guide ethical action speaks louder than any massive collection of suggested allusions.”¹¹ The upshot of his conclusion is that Paul is hardly bringing the teachings of Jesus to bear on the need for the Roman Christians to be morally discerning.

Having made these observations, I now proceed to the most surprising omission of all: the Holy Spirit. Yet the absence of any direct reference to the Holy Spirit is more apparent than real. As Fee observes, the Spirit is “presupposed everywhere” in the passage, particularly in the imperative to “be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”¹² This renewal (*anakainosis*) of the mind, as many commen-

tators have correctly noticed, points back to the "newness" (*kainotes*) of life effected by baptism (6:4), which frees believers to serve in the "newness" (*kainotes*) of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter (7:6).¹³ Thus the renewal of the Spirit effects a renewal of the mind that is now capable of recognizing the will of God in the concrete affairs of history. This close identification between the mind and the Spirit means that Paul is essentially optimistic about the Christian's ability to be morally discerning. As Douglas Moo observes, "Paul's confidence in the mind of the Christian is the result of his understanding of the work of the Spirit. . . . Paul's vision . . . is of Christians whose minds are so thoroughly renewed that we know from within, almost instinctively, what we are to do to please God in any given situation."¹⁴ Such people, capable of discerning God's will (*dokimazo*), stand in marked contrast to the unregenerate Gentile world that suffers from a "debased" (*adokimos*) mind (1:28). The contrast here is between two different minds: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (8:5).

So meet David and Mary Matson. After four wonderful years in the beautiful hills of East Tennessee, secure in their home and jobs, surrounded by wonderful and supportive friends, they receive a call to return to their native Los Angeles. What should they do? Maintain an academic post at Milligan College teaching in the area of New Testament, or take on a preaching ministry at a church situated directly across from one of the great universities of the world? How should they discern the will of God?

As we agonized over this decision for the better part of a year, help came from an unlikely source. Shortly after interviewing at Westwood Hills, I had lunch with my in-laws at my favorite Chinese restaurant. At the conclusion of the meal, we were served the traditional fortune cookie. We joked about what it might possibly say to the current dilemma we were facing. Upon breaking open the cookie, I read the fortune aloud: "Try something new and different; you will like the results." We laughed, of course, and immediately dismissed it out of hand. **But I must confess that for a brief moment in time,**

in a fleeting moment of weakness, I really wished that God's will worked that way. I really *did* want God to tell me point-blank what we should do. I really *did* want a commandment, a "law" from on high, to remove the disconcerting ambiguity. But if Paul's words in Romans teach us anything at all, they teach us the need for discernment, the need to *test* the good, acceptable, perfect (and elusive) will of God. Maybe, just maybe, we know God's will best in hindsight rather than in foresight, in retrospect rather than in prospect.

Thank God we did not and do not go it alone. After all, the "you" of Rom 12:2 is plural, reminding us that discerning the will of God is ultimately a community affair. We discover God's will best when we discover it together.¹⁵ Then will we be capable of that Spirit-led discernment that enables us to hear the word of God in a particular situation and respond in what Hays calls "imaginative freedom" to embody the righteousness of God.¹⁶

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Notes

¹ Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 470.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 598.

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 715.

⁵ The verb appears seventeen times in the canonical Pauline corpus, while the related noun (*dokime*, "character") appears seven times, and the adjective (*dokimos*, "approved"), six times. Of particular relevance is Eph 5:10, where believers are exhorted to "try to find out" (*dokimazo*) what pleases the Lord, and Phil 1:10, where Paul prays that the Philippians will grow in love and insight so that they will be able to "determine" (*dokimazo*) what is best.

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 233.

⁷ See, e.g., five ways in which scripture informs Paul's ethics in Richard B. Hays, "The Role of Scripture in Paul's Ethics," in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters: Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering Jr. and Jerry L. Sumney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 30–47.

(Notes continued on pg. 216)