

It's Complicated

A Guide to Faithful Decision Making

Jack Haberer

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*She was educated by the Jesuits from kindergarten through college.
After earning a master's degree at Columbia University,
she became the first professor of psychology at a community college.
She taught her four children how to think.*

*Two years into that teaching role, she added to her schedule the
launching of a preschool for a minority community that would
morph into one of the first Head Start programs (she was ahead
of her time). She taught her children to care for the less fortunate.*

*Years later, while still teaching at the college, she converged her
psychological expertise with an ever-deepening faith to become one
of the pioneers of inner-healing prayer and shared that gift with
anyone seeking to be freed from their worst wounds. She taught her
adult children how to facilitate the healing of broken lives.*

*I am one of those four children. This book could not have been
written apart from all that she taught me. For these reasons
and many more, I dedicate this book to my mom,
Maureen Hastings Haberer (1924–2015), whom I miss terribly.*

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Introduction

“The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” Or does it? Did it ever? Whenever I see that bumper sticker on a car I sigh a wistful sigh. In fact, I nod in agreement. But my second thought goes more like, “If only. . . .” There was a time when I thought faith was that simple. But then life happened. It got complicated. And when I learned more about what the Bible says, it became apparent that faith wasn’t even that simple for those in the Bible!

Oh, I still believe the Bible. I believe that God inspired its writing. But that is one big book. If God needed that many pages to guide our daily living, perhaps God was clueing us in to the fact that life just isn’t as simple as the bumper sticker claims.

Yet, God did give us such a book. God knew you and I do want to find answers that stand the test of time. We want those answers because we want to be good and we want to do good. We want to do God’s will. “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”: More than a few times a week I repeat this line of the Lord’s Prayer. Often, amid a crowd of worshipers, I get caught up in the rhythm of familiar words so ingrained in my brain I can say them without thinking. But when I’ve lingered on this simple appeal, it has made me wonder, “How do I know what God’s will is?”

Discerning God’s will and following it is complicated. Most of us don’t like that. We prefer preachers and prophets who give us simple answers for doing good. We want that bumper sticker to be true. But life just isn’t simple. From planning our daily hour-by-hour schedule to wrestling with the biggest controversies around public policy, from choosing a major in college to choosing a mate

for life, making good decisions, the kinds of decisions that will actually align our will with that of our loving God, is complicated. It takes hard work.

That's what this book is about.

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I invite you to dig into this subject of faithful decision making. But I must warn you. This is not a children's book. If the publisher would label it like the movie industry does, it would require a "Parental Advisory" sticker on it. Not that its sexual content will be prurient; nor will violent scenes gush with blood. And you won't find any foul language. It just won't let you get away with childish, simplistic thinking.

Granted, Jesus said that unless you come to him as a child you will not be able to enter his kingdom, but he did not say that you have to remain as a child forever. His kingdom is not inhabited by toddlers alone. And it isn't led by kindergartners.

This book will press you to wrestle with matters of faith and judgment that recognize that complexities, difficulties, and struggles come with the territory. It will pop the bubble of denial, shallowness, and simplistic platitudes that so often masquerade as courageous, principled living. And it will press you to contemplate the good that dwells in your heart and in those with whom you often find yourself at odds.

Good does dwell within us. In fact, from "good morning" to "good night," our days pulsate with yearnings for a goodness that dwells in the farthest reaches of our most heroic dreams.

The Best Intentions

We humans want to be good. In fact, the aspiration toward goodness is so pervasive that in his book *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis cites the existence of human conscience as proof positive of a transcendent divinity.¹ Our consciences demand so much of us and call such

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1952), 31–35.

good out of us that they could have resulted only from the imprint of an eternally holy Creator, suggests Lewis. They serve as a DNA marker for our having been created in God's own image.

Persons who self-identify as followers of Jesus also testify to a growing desire for goodness sparked by their profession of faith. Jesus said to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). For good reason. Any person loving another will seek to please that other one. Anybody loving Jesus will seek both to follow his teachings and to emulate his character.

The apostle Paul testifies that "all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18). This, he says, serves the ultimate purpose that Jesus would "be the firstborn within a large family" who are "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29).

This process was anticipated by the prophet Jeremiah, who foresaw the day when God would institute a new covenant with the family of God: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33b). That promise is cited word for word by the writer of the book of Hebrews (8:10) as having been initiated in the new covenant established by Jesus Christ and applied by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul urges the believers to "work out your own salvation," assured that "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12b, 13).

The Devil Is in the DNA

But we're not all sweetness and goodness. Another principle also thrives in the bowels of our beings: the love of the bad. In the 1990s, bad became the new good. Oh, it was one thing to say to a friend, "You look really good." But that compliment paled into nothingness in comparison to the far greater compliment: "You look really bad." That became the ultimate form of flattery. Michael Jackson's song and album *Bad*—which sold something like 879 gazillion copies—tapped into that part of our being that likes to color outside the lines,

to light fireworks, to eat indulgent sweets and fatty meats, to drive above the speed limit, to read novels or watch movies that appeal to our naughty side, our sinful inclinations.

Yes, I used that word *sinful*. Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike trace the practice of sin back to a garden in which the first humans were created in the image of God. Then after violating that image, humanity was banished to a life of exile beyond the garden gates. Nevertheless, God still authorized the humans to play God. God stood by the original commission that the humans should create additional humans in their own image. Those children would now be the first mixed-breed humans: created in the image of the holy God and procreated in the image of their sinful human parents—and of their parents’ parents, and their parents’ parents’ parents, and so on.

As if that were not enough, the trinity of negative influences—the world around, the appetites within, and the powers and principalities prowling about—all push and pull, seduce and incite us to expand the breadth and depth of our waywardness.

Cauldrons

Add those negative influences to the yearning for goodness, and we all find within ourselves cauldrons of conflicted desires. The accounts of humanness so vividly portrayed in the unfolding biblical drama of the people of God catch real individuals at their best and at their very worst. One extends pardon to the brothers that sold him into slavery and incarceration. Another musters the courage to believe that with God’s help he can topple a giant with a few smooth stones. An army crushes evil empires, routing enemy armies simply by lifting their voices in worshipful song. A stranger finds the strength to help Jesus carry his cross.

The biblical accounts catch those same humans trading their birthrights for a bowl of soup. They conjure schemes of self-promotion. They sink into the quicksand of their lust. They refuse to apologize and decline to forgive. They showcase an outward generosity to camouflage their miserliness.

This existential ambivalence threw the welcome baby party in the little town of Bethlehem. There, the young virgin writhed in labor while smelling the donkeys’ excrement. There, the angel chorus sang

in a perfect harmony that the shepherds probably didn't match. And while the star pierced the darkness, it did not pulverize it; night was still night after all. Three-plus decades later, Jesus' death did the opposite: the darkness that eclipsed all hope disintegrated when he burst forth in resurrection light.

By that death and resurrection, Jesus bestowed the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation between humans and their Creator. He granted the gift of righteousness, that is, a right relationship to the holy God. And he initiated a process of changing the lives of all believers by way of sanctifying them, gradually strengthening their true selves—created in God's image—and weakening the grip that their former Godlessness had upon them.

But Then What?

If the grip of badness is loosening its power over believers, how should they then live? The traditional Sunday school response to that question has been, "Follow the Ten Commandments." From Roman Catholics' enumerating sins mortal and venial, to Dutch Reformers printing the Decalogue (lit., "ten words") on the front walls of their sanctuaries, those stone tablets have provided the focal point for civilizations' moral and ethical codes for three millennia.

But we have a problem with the commandments beyond that of our own weakened willpower to follow them. An even bigger problem looms in the hairline fractures that peel through our brains: we don't really and truly believe in those commandments in the way most of us claim.

The Troublesome Ten

A funny thing happens on the way to following the commandments of God: we trip over them.

- We're commanded by Moses to disassociate from false gods, and in the New Testament the apostles (Acts 15) forbid eating food offered to idols. But then the apostle Paul tells the Corinthians to go ahead and eat whatever food their pagan neighbors serve, in effect saying, "Don't ask. Don't tell."

- We're commanded to keep the Sabbath holy—doing no work—yet on one of those days Jesus allows his disciples, while walking through farmland, to harvest, husk, and eat grain just because they didn't want to wait till sundown.
- We're told to honor our parents, but when a man called by Jesus to follow him responds, "First let me go and bury my father." Jesus shuns him, saying, "Let the dead bury their own dead" (Luke 9:60). And on another occasion he says,

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."

(Matt. 10:34–37)

- We're told not to bear false witness, but given the option between offending with the truth and peace making with a white lie, we'll choose the latter at least once in a while.

You name a major commandment in the Bible, and you probably can find a story in the Bible wherein a hallowed superstar violates that very command—and does so with impunity or even with endorsement.

Battling Believers

What's more, followers of Jesus are not exactly of one mind on all matters of morals and ethics. In the present era the loudest debates have revolved around matters of same-gender attraction and relationships. Should the twenty-first-century church be excluding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) expressions of sexual

intimacy as it has through past millennia? Or should the church embrace those of the LGBT community and even consecrate same-gender unions and marriages with the same wonder and joy as surround traditional opposite-gender marriages?

Just about as loud are the internecine battles over life-and-death matters, especially abortion. Should the conception of a child within a womb be celebrated always as a miracle and that fetus be granted protected status? Or should the mother be entrusted with the authority to choose whether to carry to term or to abort that fetus? What about those tragic situations of pregnancies caused by incest or rape, and of medical threats to the mother's own life? What about end-of-life situations, the painful questions surrounding the sustaining of a body via extraordinary measures? And is the death penalty an appropriate application of divine justice or a wretched venting of human vengeance?

What about a citizen's duty to support the environment? And should Christians support and defend Israel—speaking out on behalf of the Jews—Jesus' birth family? Or should Christians support and defend Palestinians, among whom are a significant number of Christians? And what does it look like to be Christian peacemakers in that troubled land? Or, indeed, should both people-groups be held to the same kinds of international laws and standards as other noniconic peoples? And are women and men equals in all respects, or should they be complementary partners with distinct roles to fulfill?

Every major monotheist faith—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—suffers innumerable internal disputes over conflicting viewpoints held by people of intense faith whose ideological passion is prompted by a yearning to be right and good.

Other Nagging Questions

Apart from the hotly debated controversies, humans of all stripes face age-old questions whose answers continually elude simple explanation:

- How to manage personal finances
- With whom to endeavor to build a life together as family
- How to cope with addictions—one's own and another's
- How to choose a career

This book can't thoroughly tackle all of these topics. But the nagging nature of all of them prompts me to ask in a broad, sweeping way, "How can we know what God would have us to do in such complicated times? Furthermore, can our understanding of God's guidance lead to the kind of empowerment that would actually help us to achieve the better good toward which our best selves aspire?"

Another Book?

What can this book offer to help address such matters? What is my plan? First, I will pull together several kinds of questions into a single framework. Books on morals and ethics abound. Books on discerning one's vocation or calling abound (both secular-vocation books and religious-calling books). Books on understanding God's will for everyday questions abound. This book will tackle all of those questions at once because they are all related. It will tackle practical life questions while keeping sweeping ethical concerns in view. I'll be wearing my priestly alb, my professorial tweed jacket, and my guidance-counselor open-collar shirt all at once.

Second, I will take you on a journey through the Bible to encounter both sweeping themes and the idiosyncratic oddities that seem to defy them. Together we will seek to understand God's will as revealed by Spirit-inspired writers who were dealing themselves in the toughest decisions of their lives in the complicated times of their lives. We will listen intently to Jesus, and we'll watch to see how his disciples interpreted and implemented his mission in foreign lands and divergent cultures long after his ascension took his audible voice away from them. Instead of shushing to silence the Scripture passages that don't match our Sunday school training, we'll embrace them, consider them, and help make sense of them. In the process, we will treat every page of the Bible as inspired by God.

Third, I will help you formulate an interpretive framework for addressing your questions in the light of such biblical teachings. In lectures preparatory to writing this book, I kiddingly have spoken about "doing ethics by spreadsheet." Well, all kidding aside, I will lay out for you four different spreadsheets that will form a logical and faithful way to interpret the Scriptures to be applied to your life. And

while you won't be carrying such spreadsheets in your pockets any more than were Mary, John, Peter, or Paul, hopefully the framework will stick with you to equip you to discern your way through these complicated times.

In the process I will aim to affirm your best intentions, giving language to the learnings that your experiences, study, and intuition all have built into your heart and mind. And, hopefully, you'll be equipped to help others to do the same.

Have you ever watched the on-field interview of the game's most valuable player at a Super Bowl, which is usually the winning team's quarterback? The sportscaster typically asks a simple question: "What was your key to such success?" Typically, the sweaty, exhilarated athlete says something like "It was all about the offensive line. Those guys gave me the time to throw. They opened holes for the running backs. They were just spectacular." No doubt those normally unsung, little-noticed linemen deserve credit and appreciate being singled out like that, but, truth be told, there are a lot of other reasons for the team's success:

- The heroic pass catching of the wide receivers
- The speedy ball carrying of the running backs
- The stifling defensive play that went on while that quarterback was sitting on the bench
- The brilliant coaching coming from the sidelines
- The encyclopedic research prepared in advance by the teams' scouts
- The savvy trades made by the team's coaches in the off-season
- The millions of dollars invested by the team's owner to put all that talent together on one team

Christian decision making usually gets explained in simple categories and simplistic, reductionist logic. In reality, however, it operates in complex, intricate, overlapping, and ambiguous ways. Most of us make good decisions much of the time, but like the victorious quarterback, we explain our decision-making processes to our friends and children in ways that don't actually match how we really made those decisions. We don't know how to preach what we practice.

In a Nutshell

This book hopes to help you, the reader, to think through your practices and to figure out how to tell others the same. To preach what, indeed, you practice. Specifically, my goal is to help you articulate an authentically Christian way of discerning God's will for your personal life decisions (both the big ones and the small ones) and for your life together with others in Christian community—indeed, in the whole kingdom of God.

By *authentically* I mean “honestly”: not claiming to be something or someone that you are not; not pretending to others or yourself that things are better or worse than they really are; not discounting your own character nor exaggerating your own culpability; and not pretending that God makes all stories have happy endings. To be authentic is to be genuine, true, and transparent.

By *Christian way of discerning God's will*, I do not exclude the Jewish and Muslim way of discerning God's will. However, this book will specifically tap the principles taught and modeled in both the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament and in the Christian New Testament, treating those two sets of documents as the Word of God. The whole Bible will be our textbook, taking seriously not only the clear, definitive commands found therein but also the vague, confusing, odd commands and incidents reported as well. I will show how the Bible itself gives us clues on how to integrate the points of inconsistency and ambiguity.

Your search to learn how to *discern God's will for your personal life and for your life together with others* will hold those two realms together. We won't allow our American individualism to eclipse our life in community. We won't allow community goals and needs to trample over individual rights and responsibilities. And the community we will address will include not only your nuclear family and local congregation but also the larger church of the denominational and ecumenical world. It will even include the kingdom of God that was first glimpsed four thousand years ago when a man and woman were told to leave their homeland to go to a place prepared for them. This is the God thing that God is doing in the world—proceeding toward the day when all can say that the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and Christ, just as he

taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven.”

Ultimately, my hope is that we together will discover a truly ethical way of living, will actualize maturity in Christ, and will show forth a witness of authenticity and candor that bring credit to the faith and that cause our lives to sing a new song of joy. You see, what’s so great about being good is that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, unleashed on the world by the love of God, makes possible the experience of communing together in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit’s power has been unleashed in us to teach and to empower us to desire and to actually implement the Lord’s work in the world.

But what about the will of God? How might we discern it? How can we know and live the greater good? Let us together seek faithful answers to these questions in order to help us make faithful decisions all toward the end of living faithful lives.

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