12. Explain this statement by the author: "the people of God were created by the revelation, rather than the creators of the revelation." _____

13. What explains the Church? _____

14. What does the privilege of every individual Christian to read and interpret the Bible for himself carry with it? _____

15. Name two other divine resources (in addition to the Bible) in seeking to know God's will. _____

16. Name two evils which Paul and the Scriptures in general considered wrong within themselves that some proponents of situation ethics claim could be right in certain situations. _____

17. How can the Bible's laws speak a helpful word to us today? _____

18. What is necessary if we are to know God's will in every changing situation? _____

19. What happens to us as the will of God becomes more central in our lives? _____

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3). The following activities are based on the study guide text.

1. Name and explain the two aspects of God's will that the author feels are of particular significance in a study of the Christian life.
2. Explain the author's "lesser-of-two-evils" theory. Show how it relates to God's circumstantial will.
3. Explain this statement: "The authority, in the final analysis, is not in the words of the Scripture but in the Word revealed in the Scriptures which produced the Scriptures and which also makes them come alive."
4. When the Christian finds no direct word from the Lord in the Scriptures that will help him in a particular situation, what should he then do?
5. Explain the work of the Holy Spirit in helping the Christian understand the will of God.
6. The author states that "The Bible provides the standard and norm even for the Church." Why does he feel that this is true?
7. Concerning the individual Christian reading and interpreting the Bible, what is his inherent right as a human created in the image of God?
8. Why is it unfortunate that the word "situation" has been identified with the word "ethics" (situation ethics)?

most times of decisions we seek God's circumstantial will.

The idea of the circumstantial will of God is closely related to the lesser-of-two-evils theory concerning moral decisions. Since we are evil and the world in which we live is evil, frequently our decisions are not between an unmixed good and an unmixed evil. They are somewhere between these two positions. The best one can do is to make the decision that will result in the maximum of good and the minimum of evil, recognizing that on many occasions some evil will result whatever the decision may be. As long as it is clearly recognized that the decision is the lesser-of-two-*evils*, it will not do a great deal of damage. There will remain a tug towards the greater good, or towards the intentional or perfect will of God. As long as the tug is there, there is hope for improvement. This means that the circumstantial will of God, when properly understood, will tend to move us towards His intentional will.

Another distinction that is frequently made that is closely related to the intentional and circumstantial will of God is the difference between the absolute and the relative. The choice here, as is so frequently true, is not an either/or but a both/and. There is not only a place in the Christian life for both the relative and the absolute; they really belong together. Tillich, for example, suggests that "basic ethical norms must unite an absolute element and a relative element. They must be universally valid and, at the same time, adapted to the concrete situation."[1] Their adaptation does not nullify their universal validity. One absolute, operative for the Chrsitian in every particular situation, is his submission to God and his obedience to the will of God. The more completely we follow the will of God, the more clearly we will understand that it is "good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). We will discover that His will is always best for us.

The Bible and the Will of God

Whether we are considering the intentional or the circumstantial will of God, we still need to know how we can know His will. How can man know what God is seeking to say to him? How has God sought to speak to men in the past, and how does He attempt to speak to them today? What channels does He use to reveal His will to us? These questions correctly imply, as suggested earlier, that we believe that the final authoritative word for the child of God is in God and His will. Right for us is basically not what reason dictates but what God says. It is not what society or any segment of society approves but what our heavenly Father approves.

God through the centuries has sought to reveal His will to men through nature, through providence, and through history. These sources for the will of God have been and are helpful, but they do not provide sufficient guidance. In addition to this general revelation there is a special or unique revelation which is recorded in the Scriptures. The Bible is the main tangible, objective source for a knowledge of God and His will. When we agree that this is true, there still remain some questions concerning the Bible that need to be answered.

[1] Paul Tillich, *Morality and Beyond* (Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 34–35.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Frequently our decisions are not between an unmixed good and an _____.

(unmixed evil)

One absolute for the Christian is his _____ *and his* _____ *to the will of God.*

(submission, obedience)

Are the following statements true or false?

1. The Bible is the main tangible, objective source for a knowledge of God and His will. _____

One question is: Is the Bible the only source for a knowledge of the will of God? The answer is clearly, No. It is a unique source for the will of God, but it is not the exclusive source. The reasons for this answer will become evident as we proceed with our discussion. Another question is: What about our problems, and there are many, that are not directly discussed or considered in the Bible? What is the source of authority for the Christian then? Still another question is: What about portions of the Bible that require interpretation? Who is to speak the authoritative word for the child of God? These questions will be discussed, to some extent, later.

The following is one that we will not discuss later: Is all the Bible equally authoritative, equally a source for the will of God? There are some who contend that all of the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, is equally authoritative. This was the viewpoint, in the main, of the reformers, the Puritan fathers, and is the viewpoint of many today. Many who hold this position become what might be called "Old Testament Christians." Their perspective, in the main, is the perspective of the Old Testament rather than of the New. They have not moved from Law to Grace. They need to remember the words of Jesus, "You have heard that it was said. . .but I say unto you. . ." (Matt. 5:21, 27, 33, 39, 43).

Others suggest that authority rests primarily in the New Testament. An Old Testament scholar (H.H. Rowley) says that the New Testament must be finally normative for the Christian even in his understanding of the Old Testament. The Old Testament forms a unity with the New Testament, but to use a term of Rowley's, it is a dynamic rather than a static unity. There is movement.

A third viewpoint is that the final authority for the Christian rests in the life and teachings of Jesus. It is the writer of Hebrews who says, "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son." That Son "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Heb. 1:1–3). The climax of the revelation of the nature, character, and will of God is in the Son. This means that Christ is the final authority rather than the Bible as such. The authority, in the final analysis, is not in the words of the Scriptures but in *the Word* revealed in the Scriptures which produced the Scriptures and which also makes them come alive. The Scriptures can lead us to Christ but, as sacred as they are, they cannot take the place of Christ. When properly understood, this does not detract from the authority of the Bible, it clarifies and deepens it. Back of the Bible is the divine Person who gave birth to the Bible. His authority is prior to the Bible, but it is also expressed through the Bible.

Some people suggest that only those elements of the teachings of Jesus that have passed the test of historical-textual criticism should be considered authoritative. Many who take this position look for authority outside of the Bible. They tend to make a purely rational or philosophical approach even though they may speak and write about the Christian life and the Christian ethic. This should not be interpreted as belittling the historical-textual approach. Anything that will help to get us closer to the original manuscripts should be welcomed.

2. The Bible is the only source for the will of God.

_____

(1.true; 2.false)

Read the adjacent paragraphs. Then LIST and briefly EXPLAIN three viewpoints concerning the Bible's authority.

1. _____

_____

_____

_____

2. _____

_____

_____

_____

3. _____

_____

_____

_____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

The Scriptures can lead us to Christ, but they cannot take the_____ of_____.

(place, Christ)

The Holy Spirit and the Will of God

The Bible, as suggested, is the main tangible, objective source for a knowledge of the will of God. The Holy Spirit is the main inner subjective source for such a knowledge. Both the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are needed in man's search for an authoritative word from the Lord. They do not contradict one another, although because of our human limitations they may seem to at times. They speak the same word because they both speak of and for *the Word* made flesh. In general, the Scriptures speak *of* Christ, the Spirit speaks *for* Christ. The unity of their authority rests in Christ.

It is also true that the Holy Spirit speaks in and through the Scriptures. He as the inspirer of the writers of the Scriptures is the best interpreter of those Scriptures. He illuminates the words of the Scriptures, making them come alive. To paraphrase a statement of Henlee Barnette's: To be guided by the Spirit is to be led into a knowledge of the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures and climaxed in Christ.[2] While the Spirit does not contradict the Scriptures, He does at times supplement them. When the Christian finds no direct word from the Lord in the Scriptures that will help in a particular situation, he then can seek the guidance of the Spirit. Both Scriptures and the Holy Spirit are needed. Brunner concludes that "as the Scriptures without the Spirit produces false legalism, . . . so the Spirit without the Scriptures produces false Antinomianism, and fanaticism."[3]

The clarity of our insight into the Scriptures and into the will of God will be determined, to a considerable degree, by our willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit. He has been sent into the world to teach us all things (John 14:26). It is only the seeking mind and the willing heart, however, that will know: "If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know. . ." (John 7:17). At best, our knowledge of God and His will is never complete or perfect. The will of God is never static, not only because of our human limitations but also because it is the will of the *living* God. Furthermore, the Christian is constantly faced with new situations involving varying circumstances. The will of God for man is not a mere abstraction. It is dynamic reality which must find expression in constantly changing situations.

The maturing Christian acknowledges not only that his knowledge of the will of God is far from perfect; he also admits that many times he lacks the desire to know that will. Even when he knows the will of God he frequently lacks the dynamic to move him towards the attainment of that will. In other words, the child of God is in desperate need of the guidance and the power of the Holy Spirit.[4]

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[2] Henlee H. Barnette, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Broadman Press, 1961), p. 94.

[3] Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. by Olive Wyon (Lutterworth Press, 1937), p. 92.

[4] One of the most evident weaknesses of situation ethics is the limited place given to the Holy Spirit. For example, the index to Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics* (Westminster Press, 1966), has only four references to the Holy Spirit. One is a quotation from Paul, while in two places he equates the Holy Spirit and love: "Love is not the work of the Holy Spirit, it *is* the Holy Spirit—working in us" (p. 51, cf. p. 155).

Both the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are needed in man's search for an _____ *word from the* _____.

(authoritative, Lord)

The Holy Spirit as the inspirer of the writers of the Scriptures is the best _____ *of those* _____.

(interpreter, Scriptures)

The clarity of our insight into the Scriptures and the will of God will be determined to a considerable degree by our _____ *to be led by the* _____.

(willingness, Holy Spirit)

Why does one need the Holy Spirit for every day living?

_____

_____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The Holy Spirit not only speaks to the individual child of God, He also speaks in, to, and through the Christian fellowship. Any Christian should consider very seriously the judgement of his church. Some churches and some Christians claim that the final word of God even for the individual Christian is channeled through the Church. They suggest that the Church is the mediator of the will of God.

Those who take this position may agree that the Bible is a record of God's will for man, but they claim that the people of God antedated the Bible, gave birth to it, and hence the authority rests primarily in the Church. It is contended that the Bible should be considered authoritative only as it is interpreted by the Church.

It is true that the Bible is in a sense the product of the people or community of God. In the Old Testament this community was the Chosen People. They produced the books of the Old Testament. Those books, to a considerable degree, grew out of their experiences with God. In the New Testament the Church, the spiritual Israel, gave birth to the books of the New Testament.

The books of the New Testament as well as those of the Old Testament cannot be understood fully, interpreted properly, or applied wisely apart from an understanding of the historic situation that gave them birth. The Bible is a record of God's activity in, through, and on behalf of His people. It reveals God at work within the historic process speaking to a particular day but we believe expressing truths that are applicable to every day.

Does this mean that the final source of authority is the Church or the people of God? Let us consider for a moment the Old Testament. Back of the people of God was God Himself. They cannot be explained apart from Him and His purposes. The revelation of God which gave birth to the Old Testament may have been and was given to His people, but we should remember that it was given and not invented by them. Also, it was given to them that they might share it with others. In other words, the people of God were created by the revelation rather than creators of the revelation.

Something of the same relation can be seen in the New Testament. It is true that the Church preceded the Scriptures and gave rise to them. However, the Christian community or Church is explained by something outside or beyond itself. That something was the Divine Event, the pivotal point of all history: the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. This event gave birth both to the Church and to the New Testament Scriptures. It is true that the Church ultimately formulated and determined the canon, but the books of the New Testament were not originated by the Church.

John Knox suggests that rather paradoxically the Bible is, on the one hand, less than the Church and, on the other hand, it is greater than the Church "because it brings us the only record we have of the event through which the community was brought into being and therefore provides the only means for its constant renewal." He then adds: "This is the ground of the Bible's authority."[5] The Bible provides the standard and norm even for

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The Holy Spirit also speaks in, to, and through the _____.

(Christian fellowship)

The Bible can be viewed as a product of the _____.

(community of God)

The Bible is a record of God's activity in, through, and on behalf of _____.

(His people)

Is the following statement true or false?

The people of God can be explained apart from God and His purposes. _____

(false)

The people of God were not _____ *of the revelation.*

(creators)

The Christian community or Church is explained by the Divine Event: the life, _____, *and* _____ *of* _____.

(death, resurrection, Jesus)

The Bible provides the standard and norm even for the _____.

[5] John Knox, *Criticism and Faith* (Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1952), p. 63.

the Church. This is true because of the Divine Event revealed in the Bible which gave birth to the New Testament and also to the Church. With Christ as the mediator between God and man, there is no need or room for a mediatorial Church. He through the Spirit speaks the final and authoritative word to the child of God. He may use channels or instruments, including the Church, but the word is from Him, and in the final analysis, He speaks directly to the mind and heart of the believer. The Church can and should help men to know the will of God. It, at least, should "tilt men's faces" towards God.

(Church) _____

The Church can and should help men to know the _____.

(will of God) _____

The Individual and the will of God

When we discussed the Bible as the source of authority two questions were asked that were not answered. Those questions were: What about problems that are not directly discussed or considered in the Bible? What about portions of the Bible that require interpretation? When faced with such situations, who or what is to determine the authoritative word for the child of God? What is the answer to the latter question? We believe that the child of God is not to look to the Church or a representative of the Church for the final authoritative word. Although the traditions and the teachings of the Church should be taken seriously, the individual must finally determine for himself what the will of God is in and for his life. He is the ultimate interpreter of the Bible and of the leadership of the Divine Spirit.

Is the following statement true or false?

The child of God is not to look to the Church or a representative of the Church for the final authoritative word. _____

(true) _____

As one seeks to use the Bible in his search for the will of God there are some questions he should ask and seek to answer. Should the Bible be considered a rule book, with a specific solution for every problem, an answer for every question? Are many of its commandments authoritative for us today, except the commandment of love as the situationists insist? Are we justified in setting aside every commandment or principle if the situation seems to justify it? In other words, is the Bible relevant and authoritative for contemporary Christians?[6] This is a tremendously important question and one which every Christian, in a very real sense, must answer sooner or later.

What questions can one ask concerning the Bible as one seeks God's will for one's life? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Let us again emphasize that the individual Christian is to read and interpret the Bible for himself and to apply it to his own life. When he faces problems where he does not find direct guidance in the Bible, he is to decide for himself under the guidance of the Holy Spirit what is the will of God. This is his inherent right as a human created in the image of God. Let us never forget, however, that every right is accompanied with a comparable responsibility. How wonderful is the right we have to live our own lives, to make our own decisions, but how awesome and sometimes terrible is the responsibility.

Is the following statement true or false?

The individual Christian is to read and interpret the Bible for himself and to apply it to his own life. _____

(true) _____

We should be grateful to our heavenly Father that He has provided many possible sources of help for us as we seek His will. Some of these are human sources, others are more specifically divine sources. Whether human or divine they are good gifts from God. Among the human resources are our own rational

[6] See pp.50-51 for a discussion of the relevance of the Bible.

nature and what we call "conscience." Reason is a valuable asset to us as we seek to know the will of God. The authority, however, is in the will of God and not in reason or any other source we use to discover that will.

There are other human resources that we can utilize in times of decision. One of these is the counsel or advice of others. This may be the counsel that is given personally or through pamphlets and books; it may be counsel that is sought or unsought, given consciously or unconsciously. We can also receive help by participating in the life and work of the church.

A proper use of our personal experiences can help us in our search for the will of God. Some would make experience authoritative. Personal experience may and will help us to interpret and evaluate the truth, but it is not the source of the truth. It is true, however, that the will of God which is external to man never becomes effectively authoritative for him until it is internalized. To become a dynamic reality, it must be experienced.

In addition to the Bible there are other divine resources. One of the most significant of these is prayer, which is communication or dialogue and not monologue. We need to pray as we seek to follow our own best judgement and as we seek the counsel of others. Prayer helps us in many direct and indirect ways. We need to pray not only that we may know the will of God but that we may have the strength and courage to do it.

Another divine resource, previously discussed, is the promise of the leadership of the Holy Spirit. We should seek His leadership as we study the Bible, as we counsel with others, and as we use various resources that are available in seeking to know the will of God. Very seldom does the Spirit flood our soul with light but we can be sure that He will give us enough light to take the next necessary step. There is a Chinese proverb that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. We need just enough light to take the next step. The best assurance of being within God's will tomorrow is to be within His will today.

In times of decision, we can utilize other _____.

(human resources)

The will of God never becomes effectively _____ *for man until it is* _____.

(authoritative, internalized)

One of the most significant of divine resources in seeking to know God's will is _____.

(prayer)

The Situation and the Will of God

There is a great deal of interest in the contemporary period in situation ethics.[7] It is unfortunate that the word "situation" has become identified with this particular type of Christian ethic. This makes it difficult for one to give the proper recognition to the importance of the situation without being consid-

Is the following statement true or false?

The author agrees in all points with situation ethics. _____

(false)

[7] Of many books on or reflective of situation ethics, the one best book is Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*. John A. T. Robinson has a chapter (6) entitled "The New Morality" in his *Honest to God*. He later published a booklet of approximately fifty pages entitled *Christian Morals Today* (Westminster Press, 1964). Two books with multiple authors which examine the pros and cons of situation ethics are: *Storm over Ethics* (Bethany Press, 1967), and particularly Harvey Cox (ed.), *The Situation Ethics Debate* (Westminster Press, 1968). No one has been sharper or more vocal in his criticism of situation ethics and particularly Fletcher than Paul Ramsey. This is seen in his *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (Scribner's, 1967) in which a chapter is devoted to the Honest to God debate and another to "The Case of Joseph Fletcher and Joseph Fletcher's Cases."

ered an advocate of situation ethics. We believe that the situation is an important factor in Christian decision making, but there is much in situation ethics with which we disagree.

The importance of the situation is clearly evident in the Scriptures. A striking example, and one that is cited by some situationalists is Paul's instructions concerning the eating of meat offered to idols (Rom. 14, 1 Cor. 8, and portions of 9 and 10). Paul plainly said that there was nothing wrong as such with eating the meat but the situation at Rome, Corinth, and evidently elsewhere made the eating of the meat positively wrong or sinful. One thing that should be noted by situationalists and by all of us is that Paul was not talking about an activity that was wrong within itself. The situation, particularly the attitude or reactions of people, may make wrong that which is right within itself, but it can never make right that which is wrong within itself. And we should never forget that Paul and the Scriptures in general considered some things wrong within themselves, including some that at least some proponents of situation ethics claim could be right in certain situations, such as adultery and homosexuality.

Let us repeat, however, that the situation is an important factor in decision making. God's will is made known to us in a concrete situation. As Brunner says, "The Good consists in always doing what God wills at any particular moment."[8] The authority is in God's will. In other words, the authoritative word comes from outside the situation, although God may speak specifically through and to the particular situation.

There is a sense in which the present situation is expressive of and, to some degree, a product of the past. Each situation may be and is unique but never completely so. It has a history. There is a degree of continuity from one situation to another and hence from one decision to another decision. This means, among other things, that wisdom for the present decision may come from and be informed by past events and previous decisions.

The Bible, as a record of God's past dealings with and will for man, has an important word to speak to us in our times of decision. Its precepts and principles are abidingly relevant. Even its laws can and will speak a helpful word if properly interpreted and applied. Barth suggests that the divine law in the Bible is always a concrete command. He further says, "What God commanded and forbade others, He now commands and forbids us. . . We are to be in every sense the contemporaries of these men."[9] One reason we are the contemporaries of the men of the past is because the God of the past who spoke to them is the God of the present who speaks to us. He speaks to us in the present situation, but He also speaks to us in and through the situations of men of the past. While every decision may be situationally conditioned, it is not situationally determined.

The importance of the situation is clearly _____ in the _____.

(evident, Scriptures)

God's will is made known to us in a _____.

(concrete situation)

Each situation has a _____.

(history)

Is the following statement true or false?

The Bible's precepts and principles are abidingly relevant. Even its laws can and will speak a helpful word if properly interpreted and applied. _____

(true)

[8] Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, p. 83.

[9] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. by G. W Bromiley, *et al.* (T. & T. Clark, 1957), II, 2, 701.

Summary

Let us restate the general position that has been suggested:

The will of God is the source of authority for the child of God in all of the decisions of life.

The individual child of God in any time and decision has the right and the responsibility to decide for himself what the will of God is.

God has given the individual some native equipment, such as his judgement or common sense and his conscience or sense of oughtness, that he can and should use as he seeks to know what is the will of God. Other human resources are also available.

There are two major divine resources for a knowledge of the will of God: the Bible (objective) and the Holy Spirit (subjective). Some would make the Church a third source. While the Church is an important interpreter of what both the Bible and the Spirit have to say, it is never superior to or even equal to either of them.

Since the individual, even the redeemed individual, is not only finite but is also sinful, he should maintain an attitude of tentativeness or openmindedness in his interpretation of the will of God. Ours should be a constant process of asking, seeking, knocking that we may know more fully His will in every changing situation.

This means that the situation is an important factor in determining right and wrong, in deciding what is the will of God. There are great areas of life that are relative but even the relatives of life are informed and guided by the basic absolutes.

While we have said that the individual must determine the will of God for himself, this does not mean that the individual is the final source of authority. The authoritative source is God and His will.

And let us not forget the statement of William Barclay: "There is only one way to bring peace to the heart, joy to the mind, beauty to the life, and that is to accept and to do the will of God."[10] Also, the more central the will of God is in our lives, the more unified we will be. Too many Christians as well as men in general are, as Kierkegaard expressed it, "a colony of incoherent desires and contradictory impulses." The Christian should have one dominant desire: to do the will of God; and one controlling impulse: to glorify God.

How wonderful it would be if all children of God could honestly say with the Psalmist: "I delight to do thy will, O my God" (Ps. 40:8) and could sincerily pray, "Teach me to do thy will" (Ps. 143:10). The more fully we let the resurrected Christ live in us, the more we will be able to say as the shadow of a cross looms before us, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). May we long for a time when we will "do wholeheartedly the will of God" (Eph. 6:6, NEB).

Complete the following statements.

The will of God is the source of authority for the Child of God in all the _____ of _____.

The individual must determine the will of God for _____.

God has given the individual some native _____.

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Two divine resources for knowing God's will are (1) _____ and (2) _____.

(the Bible; the Holy Spirit)

Are the following statements true or false?

1. One's mind should be closed as he interprets God's will. _____

2. Situations are not important in determining God's will. _____

3. The individual is the final source of authority in knowing God's will. _____

(1.false; 2.false; 3.false)

The more central the will of God in our lives, the more _____ we _____.

(unified, will be)

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[10] William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster Press, 2nd ed., 1958), II, 97.

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading the study guide text, answer the following questions.

1. Name one point of agreement between those who hold widely divergent theological and ethical positions.

2. What are the most important two things any Christian can do?

3. What groups are included in God's will?

4. Since past decisions may act as guidelines, but the particular circumstances of the present exert a greater force, what are we really seeking in most times of decision?

5. As long as we have the "tug" for improvement in seeking God's perfect will, what happens when we properly understand the circumstantial will of God?

6. What two things does the author suggest as one absolute operative for the Christian in every particular situation?

7. While nature, providence, and history are helpful in seeking to know the will of God, what is the main tangible, objective source for knowing God's will?

8. Explain this statement by the author: "The Scriptures can lead us to Christ but, sacred as they are, they cannot take the place of Christ."

9. What two sources are needed when man is searching for an authoritative word from the Lord?

10. What determines, to a considerable degree, the clarity of our insight into the Scriptures and into the will of God?

11. Even when he knows the will of God, why does the Christian desperately need the Holy Spirit?

LESSON 7

Its Ultimate Authority: The Will of God

Those with widely divergent theological and ethical positions usually agree that the ultimate or final source of authority for the child of God is the will of God. Differences arise, however, in regard to how one can know the will of God or the source or sources for an authoritative word concerning the content of the will of God. Some of the major answers have been "an infallible tradition," "an infallible book" (the Bible), "an infallible institution" (the Church), "an infallible leader or person" (the priest), or "an infallible experience." Some Christians so magnify the non-Christian elements, particularly reason, that their approach becomes more philosophical and secular than distinctly Christian. For most Christians, however, authority rests in God and His will rather than in man and his reason. They believe, and rightly so, that the most important thing any Christian can do is to seek to know the will of God and once knowing it to do it. As Bonhoeffer says, "The only appropriate conduct of men before God is the doing of His will." The continuing question of the child of God is or should be the one Zedekiah asked Jeremiah: "Is there any word from the Lord" (Jer. 37:17). This is true whether the question or issue is in the area of personal morality such as sex outside of marriage—before or after—divorce and remarriage, or some broader social issue such as the relative importance of law, order, and justice or the best kind of welfare programme for the needy.

The Nature of the Will of God

The will of God evolves from and is expressive of the nature of God. This means that the ultimate source of authority for the Christian is God Himself. Since He is the sovereign God of the universe His will is inclusive of the totality of our lives. He has a will for us in every time of decision. This has tremendous significance for us in the area of everyday Christian living. He also has a will for the family, the Church, the community, the nation, and the world.

The will of God is so broad that some defining objectives are needed to describe it accurately. Among some descriptive defining words that have been applied to the will of God are "perfect" and "permissive," "ideal" and "interim." In addition, there are Leslie Weatherhead's well-known distinctions between what he calls the ultimate, intentional, and circumstantial will of God. The last two of these are of particular significance in a study of the Christian life. The Christian should seek to know in every time of decision the perfect, ideal, or intentional will of God. He discovers, however, that most decisions differ to some degree from all previous decisions. Past decisions may suggest some guide lines for the present, but each decision is usually related to a particular set of circumstances. This means that in

The ultimate source or final source of authority for the child of God is the _____.

(will of God)

Name two things that are important for Christians.

1. _____
2. _____

(Compare your answers with the text.)

God has a will for us in every _____.

(time of decision)

What two aspects of God's will are believers to seek?

1. _____
2. _____

Advanced activity (Level 3). The following activities are based on the study guide text.

1. Prepare a sermon outline using Jeremiah 37:17 as a text on the following subject: "Is There Any Word From the Lord?" Use additional Scripture references in support of your position. (Students who are not pastors or studying to be pastors may prepare a Bible lesson outline instead.)
2. Write an explanation of the difference in the word "compromise " and the author's "lesser-of-two evils theory."
3. Prepare an answer to the following problems (You may use the author and Scriptures.)
   A. The owners and operators of my job are not Christians and ridicule me for my belief. What do you think is God's will for me?
   B. An eighteen-year-old young woman says,"All the young men in my community are unbelievers, and drunkards. What is God's will for my future?"
   C. My wife of fifteen years has confessed that she committed adultery. She says she has asked God to forgive her, and she asks me to forgive her. What is God's will for me in this situation?
4. What was the conclusion of Paul's discussion of eating meat offered to idols? How does this speak to us today?
5. Why must we maintain an attitude of tentativeness or open-mindedness in our interpretation of the will of God?

Seminar Discussion

1. The author states that every right is accompanied with a comparable responsibility. Discuss the implications not only in seeking God's will but also in the Christian calling.
2. Level 3 students should share the answers to the situations posed concerning the will of God in question three. The seminar leader should lead a discussion of these situations. What other situations are there that students might face?
3. There has been considerable debate about the legitimacy of dissent. Is it within the will of God? What restrictions should be placed on dissent? Can civil disobedience ever be justified? What should be the attitude of the dissenter towards the government? What if he is put in prison? Can a Christian ever be justified in advocating the overthrow of the government?
4. Level 3 students should share their sermon or lesson outlines with the group. The leader should guide a discussion of the content.