

Called According to God's Purpose (Romans 8:28b)

According to one of those online quizzes promising to help you learn more about yourself, I should be Lutheran. My youngest son should be Episcopalian. But then according to another, I am not bound to any particular belief system. Now I'm really confused! The first half of Romans 8:28 is relatively familiar to many Christians: "In all things, God works good for those who love him..." The last part of that verse may be less familiar, and certainly more challenging: "and to those who have been called according to God's purpose." How do we discern God's purpose? How are we guided in discerning God's purpose?

Let's adapt that idea of a quiz...

When I seek God's purpose I (check all that apply)

Talk with another person (a) A friend, whether or not my friend has any belief in God, (b) A friend who is a Christian (c) A friend who attends FBC
Pray (a) Pray when I think about it, (b) Pray without ceasing

Read the Bible

Attend worship services

Participate in Bible studies and/or other small group studies

Read as many articles and books on the topic in question as I can find

Learn as much as I can about contemporary culture and its impact on our choices

Other

None of these – my own understandings are sufficient

Are all of these sources of guidance in discerning God's purpose? Do you believe some are more reliable than others, that is, more consistent with who God is and what God desires for us as God's children?

Guidance: knowing and experiencing in our daily lives an interactive friendship with God

'Guidance is the most radical of the Disciplines because it goes to the heart of this matter of walking with God.

(Richard Foster)

As with other spiritual practices—solitude, fasting, silence—we often define guidance as just between God and me, or just between God and you; that is, between God and an individual.

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--David prays in Psalm 31:3 "You (O Lord) are indeed my rock and my fortress, for your name's sake, lead me and guide me."

--John 16:13 "When the Spirit of truth comes, (the Spirit) will guide you into all the truth."

Yet, as with some other spiritual practices—prayer, study, confession—guidance can be a spiritual practice we do together, as followers of Christ. There are occasions when God's Spirit speaks to one person who, in turn, speaks that truth to other believers. There are occasions when God's Spirit speaks to a group of believers. We find both in Scripture.

◇ God's Spirit speaks to one who speaks in turn to others

God spoke to Moses on the mountain, and throughout the 40 years the Israelites were in the wilderness

God spoke to Ezekiel who chastised King Ahab and his wife Jezebel for worshipping idols

◇ God's Spirit speaks through one person to others

◆ Proverbs 27:17 Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another

◆ St. Francis of Assisi 1181/1182-1226

As Francis sought to follow God, rather than live life as the son of a prosperous merchant, he desired to know whether he should be a monk devoted totally to prayer and meditation (common practice in his time) OR also engage in preaching missions
Sought guidance from Sister Clare and Brother Silvester – both responded: engage in preaching missions
Messenger returned with this message: (God) wants you to go about the world preaching, because God did not call you for yourself alone but also for the salvation of others.

◆ Society of Friends (Quakers)

Spirit of unity arriving out of meeting and worshiping together
John Woolman – 1758, spoke in opposition to slavery at the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

Quakers agreed to oppose slavery, free their own slaves and give the freed people one year's wages

We have Jesus' promise from Matthew 18:19-20 "Where two or

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more are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” Our conversations, our discussions leading to decisions can be carried out with assurance and confidence, if we open ourselves to Jesus’ presence and to the Spirit’s leading.

- ◇ God’s Spirit speaks, is manifested, to an entire group of people
 - ◆ As the Israelites moved through the wilderness for 40 years, God promised God’s Spirit would lead them: in a cloud by day and as a pillar of fire by night. When the cloud or the pillar of fire moved, the people were to move; when the cloud or the pillar of fire remained stationary, the people were to remain in one place.
 - ◆ Acts 6:1-7 Some of the Hellenists—those who became followers of Jesus but did not speak Aramaic as did the native Jews—complained their widows and orphans were not receiving assistance. Weekly collection—Jewish practice—of money and food to distribute to those in need. Daily collection for those in dire need or in need as a result of an immediate emergency. The Apostles delegated the decision to select seven to assist as a way of resolving the dispute. A body of followers met and selected those seven, including Stephen who later became the first of Jesus’ followers to be killed.
 - ◆ Acts 13:1-3 As those in the church in Antioch were worshiping and fasting, God’s Spirit moved among them, directing them to set apart Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for service. The church laid hands on these two and sent them out—the first missionaries. It is notable that within the Antioch church there were believers from Cyrene, in Northern Africa and from Cyprus, there were believers who were Roman, some were aristocrats, many were not. Together, as believers in Christ as Lord and Savior, they were called to send out two from their congregation to proclaim the Good News.
 - ◆ Acts 15 – The first 35 verses tell us the account of the first major crisis in the new Christian church. Some believers in Jerusalem, Jews, were requiring that all new male believers be circumcised. Essentially the Jerusalem Jews were expected new believers to become Jews first, if they were to be saved. Many of the new believers outside Jerusalem were Gentiles and objected to the circumcision requirement. Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to meet with Peter, James and other Jerusalem

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believers to resolve the controversy. God’s Spirit was speaking through Paul and Barnabas, through Peter and finally through James, acknowledged as the leader of the Jerusalem church. The message was the same: Christ’s church is not just a branch of Judaism; it is a new creation. Male believers did not need to be circumcised.

- ◆ Paul addressed the need for all of us, each of us, to be part of the body of Christ. In both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul emphasizes the value of each part of a physical body. Paul had experienced a community discerning the will of God. Describing the church in terms of a physical body emphasized the need for interdependence. No one is the sole recipient of God’s guidance. As I’ve said previously, “We’re all In this together.”

This is all well and good; but that was then. Life today is different. Some might say experiencing guidance as the entire body of Christ just may not be possible. Really? We do indeed live in a society that praises individualism: pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, for example. We hold up individual effort: if you work hard enough; if you decide not to be depressed, and so on. From the beginning, God has called us to live in relationship and in community. How do we, in community as FBC, listen for God’s will? How do we claim that we are “called according to God’s purpose?”

- ◇ A church that has experienced how corporate guidance may work is the Church of the Savior in Washington D.C. When someone in the church believed God was calling them, and possibly the church, to a new ministry area, the church followed a procedure of “testing the call.” A group of volunteers would gather for prayer, discernment, questions, probing, searching. The group may come to sense God’s guidance to a decision after only one meeting. The group may need several meetings over several months’ time before sensing God’s guidance to a decision. The decision could take several different forms: not proceed with the ministry, proceed with the ministry, proceed but with some alterations, or even yet another form. The process was one of involving several people from the church as they sought God’s guidance in this sense of call.

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Go back to John Woolman, a voice challenging the way Quakers treated other human beings. Perhaps we need to listen to the voices today who question how we treat one another, as individuals and in groups: for example, those whose skin color is different from our own. This weekend we have seen some of the worst of human behavior. KKK and white supremacists marching in Charlottesville VA; protesters marching in opposition to them. Death, destruction. Is God guiding us toward being an exclusive club of people who look only just like us? Who believe just what we believe? Is God guiding us to speak up, to tell all of God's love for each and every person? It doesn't matter what color you are, what country you or your ancestors came from, how much money you have, whether you live in the north or the south, we all are God's children. God loves each and every one of us. How is God guiding us to share His love?

We Baptists tend to function by majority rule. Yet as I was preparing this message, I didn't find an account when the people of God voted to decide what God's purpose for them was: the Israelites didn't vote in the wilderness; they didn't vote whether to march around Jericho. The Antioch believers didn't vote as to which of their members they would commission as missionaries. The new Christian church didn't vote as to whether male believers would have to be circumcised. If we are called according to God's purpose, we should not be seeking compromise or majority rule. If we are called according to God's purpose, we should be seeking God-given consensus; hearing the voice of God, together. As we read in Ephesians 4:3, we are to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"

If we are followers of Christ, we are to continually be growing as we listen and obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of Jesus in our individual lives. But we also must strive towards unity in the body of Christ as we seek the will of God together. God, as a loving parent, longs to guide us now, guide us as individuals, and also as a body of believers. If we ask God to guide us, we must be willing to follow, to act on God's guidance.

A word of caution –

- ◇ Avoid relying on ourselves only
Presumption that we have perfect knowledge, that as an individual I am the only person in the entire world who knows right from wrong.
- ◇ Avoid relying only on family or on a few trusted friends
Read the book of Job, whose friends came to help him answer his question, "Why am I suffering?" His friends were all wrong.
- ◇ Avoid relying on groups – sometimes we get it wrong
 - ◆ The group we belong to sometimes gives us the impression that our way is the only right way. Our group reinforces what we already believe and do. Think of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka who focus only on one issue: homosexuality. If you are in that church, you must believe exactly as everyone else does on that issue, and you must participate in their demonstrations.
 - ◆ Our group allows us to believe that "everyone believes this way," "everyone's doing this"
 - ◆ Our group allows us to avoid individual responsibility --we tend to do things we wouldn't dream possible if we were acting as individuals
Driving a car into a crowd killing one or more people, looting, burning buildings, beating people
Crowd psychology in its negative expression

Go back to the quiz we used at the beginning of this message. Which sources of guidance do you rely on? As Christians, which sources of guidance SHOULD we rely on? Can all serve as checks on the others?

St. Augustine (of Hippo)

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it (finds its rest) rests in you

Our heart – one heart, we all belong to the heart of Jesus
If St. Augustine is right, each of us is seeking; each of us is called by God.
How do we know God's purpose and then how do we answer?