

# ORTHODOX BOOKLETS

**Basic substantial teaching on what  
Orthodox Christians believe**



**9**

## **KNOWING THE WILL OF GOD?**

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# KNOWING THE WILL OF GOD

‘How do I know the will of God? This question is one most frequently asked.

God does make his will known to us. We must be clear about that.

Any person who is living in great union with God, who has made his or her life effectively one with God’s life, his or her will effectively one with God’s will, that person knows the will of God just about all of the time.

Most people however have not got there yet. So the answer to the question will, in the first place, depend very much where any person is in his or her relationship with God.

Because of this we have to look for the answers rather like we might peel an onion: we have to start on the outside and work inwards.

The first thing anybody has to do who wants to know the will of God is to get him or herself in a right relationship with God. That will mean learning to accept what God has already done for everyone who is seeking him.

Unless we begin by aligning our life with God’s already known will, no one is in a real position to acquire the ‘ears’ with which to hear God, that is from a surrendered heart which has become intimately attuned to the grace of God.

God has already made his will known about a great number of things:

He sent his Son, Jesus, that we might discover that by his Resurrection he has defeated the power of darkness, sin and death. But we cannot experience this unless we truly believe in him.

Jesus created a new unity of God and humanity by being completely obedient to God in our humanity. That same divine-human unity is found to be alive and active in his body the church. The Saints learnt this and we can do the same. But for us to receive the divine life we have to be in the place where he gives it, the church.

We are united with Jesus' death and resurrection in baptism and receive his Body and Blood regularly in the liturgy. We must receive the sacraments in the church as God's gift, and as God's will, for in them we receive Jesus.

We should listen to the scriptures and allow our hearts and minds to be shaped by the mysterious presence of Christ as we do so. For he is also God's Word to us. In this way Christ will feed our hearts and minds with the knowledge of himself.

We must begin praying and repenting, and persevere as we do so. Without this our will cannot be re-formed, re-shaped and re-created in God's will.

In doing these things we must learn how to cry out for God's healing mercy, so that our hearts may be effectively cleansed of the power of sin within them. We

cannot live in God's will without dealing with sin in this way.

We are not trying to give a merely conventional answer here. What we have said above is all about getting oneself in the right place.

That place is a place of humility and living in poverty of spirit (or of our self) before God. This is the place where we become dependent on God and not on our self. This in itself is no small thing to do.

Dependence on God involves turning away from all the clamour of one's own self which wants to be in control and to dictate our responses to life. Such answers will not be the will of God. The self which has established an identity separate from God does not wish to surrender to the will of another, even to God.

While a person is getting his or herself into the place of humility and poverty of spirit, the will of God is represented by the wisdom which exists in the living tradition of the church which the saints themselves have lived and taught.

Many people, even Christians, in the present day, throw over this wisdom. They speak out against it and rubbish it in the most cavalier way. They even justify this in the name of Christ and of the Spirit. This is profoundly wrong. I can say this because for years I kicked against many things in the tradition which to me were 'not acceptable'.

We all have to learn by experience to recognise the hardness that exists in our hearts and minds over against

the will of God. This persists for a long time in many subtle and hidden ways, all in the name of 'I know better'.

God cannot give himself to us properly while the self is still trying to call the shots and 'kicking' against all manner of things which God, in his wisdom, has built into his church from the very beginning.

If, for whatever reason, a person cannot bear this, he or she will have to understand they may simply be following their own will. But we will not fool God.

This may sound hard. It is not intended to be. It is a matter of accepting God's truth and not seeking or making our own.

If we wish to hear God we have to lose that separate identity of the self which, according to Jesus', we need to lose, if we are to receive life from him.

If we cannot hear God in what he has already done for us how can we expect to hear God at all?

Jesus made this point when he told the parable of a rich man who went to hell. He pleaded with Abraham in heaven to send and warn his family so they would not share the same fate as himself. Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' Abraham replies, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'

Another way of looking at this is to say our path towards

God is about getting real. Many difficulties in hearing God, lie in the fact we have not yet got real. We think too much about what we want the truth to be and what we want God to do for us. We have not got to that place of humility. This is said in gentleness and love – and long experience.

Christ himself is the Truth. We have to be willing to follow his way, and to accept that the truth is the way he sees it. We have to let go our constructions, our theological, churchly and spiritual constructions which we make, and try to pin on him.

It should be clear: hearing the will of God is a radical activity.

Let us suppose that a person has made progress in learning humility, repentance and prayer. What next?

When we have become a genuine disciple of Christ, Christ draws near in his love. But as his Light shines on us what may appear, first, is darkness and confusion.

Jesus has to show us the darkness that still hides within us. The confusion arises because we do not know how to handle the situation.

Jesus has to shine his light in every deep corner of our soul. God has to get all the 'stuff' in our heart that resists him or is against him out of our hearts before he can come in and effectively dwell in us.

This is not a mere mental exercise, a matter of self-development which we set out to accomplish. It is

something God initiates and does. Often deep in our heart are many unresolved issues, sometimes much hurt and pain. We may find we have powerful emotions which are beyond our control. We may have persistent thoughts which carry hidden lies. These are profoundly distressing for anyone to discover within.

When God shows us these things and we accept what he shows us, we can begin to hand over every aspect of our being to his cleansing power.

Only God can heal us. We cannot change much of what lies deep within us, but God can, if we let him.

At this point life appears difficult as we struggle to adjust. God is wanting us to let go of the mental control we exert over ourselves, so that he can open up a much deeper response to him in our hearts.

We will need encouragement from those who have already experienced this process. It is good to know that all the saints who have gone before us have trodden this path.

One of the things God shows us is how often our faith is weak, how poor how hope, how shallow our love. In order for us to endure his cleansing work he will have to build up our faith, hope and love to the full. This is often the reason why things take so much time – at the beginning we do not have these spiritual gifts anywhere near like full strength. The temptations and trials of life which God sends will show us just how much we need to increase our faith and our hope in God.

For this reason real discipleship is a daily struggle. We have to trust that God is in control in everything. We will have to endure while all the lies of the self and the world are exposed, until we abandon them all.

As we abandon all that is of self and the world we will have to learn obedience to God in all things. We will do so by growing in those spiritual virtues and strengths which counter and replace the distorted values of the self and of the world by which we lived before.

We will have to keep praying and repenting until a palpable peace begins to come to our hearts and stillness to our minds.

We must persevere until a degree of effective union with God becomes apparent in our life.

The person has to grow in those spiritual virtues till everything that he does and says is seen to be in the will of God.

Union means that God's grace works directly in our heart and mind. The sign of this is complete obedience to all God's commands in all areas of life. The test of this is always in what we do – not what we may think of ourselves.

This does not mean the person is yet perfect. There are degrees of union; the highest degree of obedience comes only after many, many years.

The upshot of all this is: we know the will of God when we live in it. We live in it when God has changed us so



that we live no longer for ourselves but live completely for him.

On a practical level, we cannot truly hear God if our hearts are not at peace and our minds will not be still.

Silence and stillness before God are the key to learning the will of God.

Silence represents the willingness of the self to be quiet – and listen.

Stillness represents the death of the self. True stillness means the self has become willing to die and cease to intrude even in the slightest.

Such stillness is a gift of God. It does not come naturally and cannot be manufactured in any way.

Such a person knows the will of God, not by calculation, not by ‘looking at the options’, nor by ‘working out’ rationally what the will of God is.

The true mode of perception does not operate through words, concepts, visions or images, but by contemplation of God - in silence of heart and stillness of mind.

Knowing the will of God involves this change in our mode of perception.

In the meantime many of us depend on hearing or seeing something, for us to understand what God wants. We may hear a word or see some kind of picture in our mind, or formulate some sort of understanding of what we believe God’s will is.

Many people understand this without further ado. Some people dramatise these as the operation of 'spiritual gifts'. They are quite normal. God will use all these until we have grown further in the way of holiness and until they are replaced by the gift of contemplation.

What is important however is that, if we rely on words, visions, or pictures of any sort, if the matter is one of some consequence, we check them out with a person of experience before we take any action.

The reason for doing so is to protect ourselves from delusion. Many people say they have heard from God, or have had a 'prophecy' or a 'vision', when they have not. This too is common experience. Even those who speak in terms of 'spiritual gifts' know this to be true.

We must understand that the recognition of any word or image by the person who receives it always depends in part on interpretation. This is where error may creep in. For the mind, which depends on our perceptions through the senses (i.e. in words or pictures), may go astray in interpreting a communication which has come to us in the spirit, i.e. which is itself beyond words and images, and beyond description.

The exercise of spiritual gifts is evident in many saints. This includes healings and miracles, as well as 'words', visions and prophecies. The supernatural working of such gifts in the saints however was accurate because of their purity of heart. Their union in Christ was such that the self could not get in and distort the gifts.

Paul told the young Christians in Corinth to 'eagerly

desire spiritual gifts'. But Paul had to bring a strong note of caution about these gifts. Christians young in the faith can easily go overboard in these areas. What happens is that the self and God become confused, with disastrous results.

St Paul related spiritual gifts to love. Love never pushes itself forward, love never insists it is in the right, love never boasts, love never seeks glory.

Unfortunately some people fail to observe the connection between the proper working of spiritual gifts and the absence of the self. This is precisely what the saints were able to discern.

Over the centuries the existence of counterfeit gifts has been evident. In such time saints of the period have had to come down heavily on spiritual gifts so as to deter people getting carried away by what will only deceive them and bring them spiritual harm. What these saints say is not against the gifts themselves, for they themselves often exercised them, but against abuse and delusion.

The tradition uses several words to help people avoid deception: humility, poverty of spirit, watchfulness, guarding of the heart, silence, sobriety and so on. Any person who does not have these things and who nevertheless purports to be exercising spiritual gifts has to be viewed with extreme caution.

Another way of saying this is that spiritual gifts and the way of holiness are intimately connected. Spiritual gifts without holiness have to be viewed, again, with

exceptional caution.

The person who is seen to have the spiritual virtues just mentioned is far more likely to have true spiritual gifts than one carried away with enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm often conceals much human energy and not the moving of the Holy Spirit.

In the end each person has to do his or her best to hear God speaking to them in whichever way it may happen. Sometimes he will get it right, and sometimes he will get it wrong. But if we get something wrong, it is not the 'end of the world'. God is still in control and he can still lead the person on to where he wants him.

When the Spirit speaks to us, what is heard or understood is usually simple and comes in peace. It is usually best to leave anything complex well alone, and the same goes for anything that comes with verbosity, confusion or uncertainty.

As a person makes progress along the way of holiness the need to hear 'words' and so on lessens. This is because Christ dwells more securely in the heart and the Spirit moves the heart and mind directly without words and visual elements.

This does not mean they disappear totally. Perceptions 'come to you' without the need to strive for them; they come simply and in peace and with a knowledge that they come from God. There is nothing dramatic. Experience is worth a thousand words in this respect. All words or thoughts are in any case surrendered straight away back into God's hands so that the rational mind

does not get to work on them and distort them. It is not so much the word as the surrender which brings about obedience.

With regard to scripture, scripture is of the highest importance because obedience to scripture is what shaped the living tradition of the church down the centuries.

The hearing of scripture has always been understood in the first case as something to be done by each and all together. In other words God speaks in the first place to his people, the church. In this way God's people have been able to recognise and confirm the true doctrinal, ethical and spiritual meanings of scripture. and use scripture to give shape to true worship of God. This is the basis of the living tradition of discipleship and holiness in the church.

This activity is quite different from 'reading scripture' as understood in more modern times. People have been encouraged to read scripture and understand it 'for themselves'. A consequence of this, sadly, has been the development of an understanding over against the church. This has resulted in thousand upon thousand of different 'understandings', many of which have resulted in founding yet another so-called church or denomination. The activity of the self, and not the Holy Spirit, can clearly be detected here.

Much 'study' of scripture has been encourages on the basis of 'faith seeking understanding'. However that understanding has so often proved to be an understanding of the rational mind, however much sought

in faith and prayer. Rational understanding is far, far apart from what the church in earlier times experienced as contemplation.

Much information has been culled from scripture and much so-called 'doctrine' discovered, but it has been largely mediated through the rational mind. Many more recent doctrines in Christian circles are of this order. They are frankly false and should be left alone.

Reading the scripture, if it is to be fruitful in holiness, must be as simple as possible and in the context of a real degree of stillness. Then we can allow God's word to seep inside us and 'come back' to us as God's wills. We should not worry if nothing at first seems to result. God has his own way of bringing his words back to us and showing us what they mean. If we cultivate the right listening before God we will be surprised how much will find a response in our hearts over time.

To return to the church's living tradition. Many people equate tradition with something closed, stuffy, cut and dried, heavy-handed, legalistic and stifling of all creativity. The living tradition is nothing of the sort.

Anyone showing a closed mind, who just trots out repetition, who is censorious and judgemental, is not manifesting the 'mind of Christ' or the 'mind of the Spirit'.

The one who listens, the one who is gentle, who is not afraid of what others say to him, who has no 'identity complex' about what he believes, is the one who lives and breathes the tradition is.

Genuine tradition has a breadth about it, a wealth about it, and a comprehensiveness about it which bestows a genuine sense of freedom. This freedom is not a freedom to do as one pleases, or a liberty to change things at will; it is the freedom to discern the will of God without haste or speed in a manner that displays the genuine breadth and generosity of spirit characteristic of true tradition.

The person who relies on the Holy Spirit does not need to be 'in the right', to insist that he knows while others do not. He does not need to go on the 'defensive' or on the 'attack'. He lets the Spirit convict and show what is right. And if the other does not hear, he leaves it to the Lord.

There is a blessing on hearing, there is an anointing on unity. This is most pleasing to the Lord. The Lord can do great things when brothers and sisters live in unity.

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