

"OFFERING AND RECEIVING WISE COUNSEL"

(Acts 21:1-17)

(Chuck Swindoll)

Although some New Testament instructions for believers are as straightforward as the Ten Commandments (e.g., Rom. 12:19; I Thes. 5:14), in many matters there are no specific instructions. Rather, we have the Spirit of God living within us, transforming us to think and behave like Christ. He has given us a great privilege that comes with immense responsibility. How do we know the difference between the prompting of the Spirit and our own slanted manner of thinking? Obviously we need to check everything against Scripture, but our own reading can become skewed by wishful thinking, personal blind spots, pet issues, or hidden fears. Therefore, we need wise advice from godly counselors.

Paul's experience suggests three guidelines for seeking and giving advice.

Guideline 1: *When you seek advice, be discerning.* If you're seeking the mind of God, choose your counselors wisely. You need the perspective of mature Christians who have demonstrated a pattern of good decision making. They should be people whom you admire, who show signs of having their priorities straight, and who always put the will of God before their own. These counselors should be experienced in the spiritual life, know their Bible well, and have a good reputation within their Christian communities as well as among non-believers.

Seek out several counselors in order to gain a well-rounded perspective, and find them early so you have as much time as possible to think, discuss, pray, and weigh options. Take time away from your normal routine to spend time in solitude, to pray, and to discuss the decision multiple times with your advisors.

Rather than become paralyzed with indecision, use the time you have available to determine the best course of action, commit it to the Lord, and then move ahead. If you make a bad move in good faith, the Lord will honor your trust in Him, and as always, He'll use the circumstance for your good. Regardless, remember that there's no such thing as a decision without a downside, and sometimes, the tradeoff is significant no matter what you do.

Guideline 2: *If you give advice, be restrained.* God gave you two ears and one mouth. That suggests a good ratio when counseling someone making a significant decision! Listen twice as much as you talk. We never learn while talking, but we always do while listening. But don't simply take in facts; force yourself into the shoes of the person so you can understand the issue from his or her perspective. Then, before you offer a response, ask



for some time to think, if that's possible. Use that time to think about the issue from God's point of view, thinking of what He values. Draw some principles of your counsel from Scripture. That'll never lead you astray. God never contradicts His Word. So, when you seek to counsel a friend, base everything on biblical insights. In *Knowing God's Will and Doing It!*, J. Grant Howard writes, "When we give Word-oriented counsel, it will be instructive. When we give experience-centered counsel, it may be nothing more than opinion."

Guideline 3: *Whether you give or receive advice, remember that humans are fallible.* That's obvious, I know. Even so, when the desire for clear direction becomes intense, we seem to expect that if we find the right person or listen to enough advice, a message from God will come through. Unfortunately, we rarely get the kind of certainty we want most. It's possible for wise people to give bad counsel with the best of motives. (I know; I've done it.) And it's possible to make a decision based on a broad consensus of wise advisors, only to discover they were mistaken. (I've been on that end of the dilemma as well.) The fact is, people are fallible, so expecting 100 percent accuracy isn't realistic. In the end, we simply have to make the best decisions we can with the information we have available, accepting the possibility that we might make a wrong move.