

WISE CHOICES

John Buchanan

Abstract

Living constantly involves making choices. The Christian perspective recognizes that God guides through the Holy Spirit and through His Word, which gives guidance for all moral choices. However, many choices are non-moral – such as, what clothes shall I wear today, shall I eat rice or noodles for lunch, or which would be the best Bible College for me to study at. While Christian literature deals extensively with moral choices (ethics), comparatively little guidance is given for the many non-moral decisions Christians make every day. This article focuses on the many important and largely non-moral choices faced by Christians and presents key findings from over forty years of research on decision making. Three main areas addressed are: perception of decision situation, processes and finally practical principles for making wise choices.

Keywords: Decision making, choice, God’s will.

Choose well; your choice is brief and yet endless - Goethe¹

Introduction

Decision making is an integral part of life; if you are alive, then you will be making choices all the time. We make decisions consciously and unconsciously, and we do it continuously. Our lives are characterized by a continual sequence of choices each of which can never be repeated, because time only moves forward. While most choices are relatively minor in impact, every choice has consequences. Iyengar has rightly observed that we are the product of our choices – that is, who we are as individuals is the cumulative effect of all our choices.² We are impacted by choices we make ourselves and by choices others (such as friends, neighbors and political leaders) make. It is not that the choices of others alone shape us, but rather it is our emotional and practical responses to the choices of others that shape us.

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¹ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, “The Mason Lodge,” trans. Thomas Carlyle, *Masonic Poets Society*, last modified 2008, accessed September 11, 2017, <http://www.mpoets.org/Goethe.htm>.

² Sheena Iyengar, *The Art of Choosing* (New York: Twelve, 2011).

Ethics, and Christian ethics no less, always involves choice. Our ethics are not defined by what we know or what we say, but by what we do; for every act of ‘doing’ is the result of a choice. Therefore, a good ethic is revealed through good choices put into action. The parable of the two sons³ suggests that, in the end, it is what we do that matters in God’s sight. The study of Christian ethics can be overly weighted toward a knowledge of ethics and of what is right, and then it is assumed that the critical issue of doing what is right will naturally follow from a knowledge of what is right. This is unrealistic, knowing that something is right does not mean one will therefore do what is right or even know what a good process is for making a wise choice.

The focus of this article is not to revisit at length the extensive literature on Christian decision making and God’s will, but rather to search for practical wisdom for those situations where there is freedom for a Christian to choose a course of action, where consideration is given to how the action will be carried out, where God has not specifically guided, and where there is no contravention of God’s moral will. Christians are stewards of the gift of choice which God has given. Thus, the practical aspects of the process of making wise choices discussed here are fundamentally about stewardship.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 will provide a brief overview of biblical decision making and the will of God. The subsequent three sections focus how to make wise choices; Section 3 addresses perception of the decision situation, Section 4 the process of making and implementing a choice, and Section 5 provides some principles for making wise choices.

Biblical Decision Making

One of the influential works on this topic in the last four decades is *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Friesen and Maxson⁴. The authors define four ways in which God guides his people. First, God has a sovereign will, in that what he decrees will come to pass, for he has control over all things. This sovereign will guide individuals often without their knowledge. Second is God’s moral will which is fully revealed in Scripture and directly expresses the character qualities and

³ Matthew 21:28-32. The first son tells his father that he will work in the field but does not. The second son tells his father that he will not work in the field but later does.

⁴ Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making & the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980).

practices expected of every Christian. Even so, there are situations where, although God's moral will is known through his commands and principles, the choice of an appropriate course of action can be far from obvious. Generally, moral choices are more a matter of obedience than of guidance, for even when guidance has been given in Scripture, the choice to obey or not is ever present. A third way of God's guidance is wisdom. Wisdom is to be sought,⁵ and asked for.⁶ It is also considered to be one of God's gifts and, importantly, can be acquired as one learns from experience. The fourth way of guidance is special guidance, where Christians have been supernaturally and specifically guided by God, through such means as dreams, miracles or a word from God, often through Scripture.

Although God's moral will is revealed in the Bible, it often does not tell us exactly what we should do. For decisions such as, "Which shirt shall I wear today?", "Shall I go over and talk to that person?" there will be possible alternative choices (actions) that do not go against the teaching of the Bible. Or, as those who propose that there is always one right action for every situation, can we then be out of God's will if we get it wrong? Friesen and Maxson argue that for many decisions, some possible actions or choices will not be contrary the moral will of God as revealed in the Bible. In this case, then, wisdom is needed to choose what is a good course of action.

In these non-moral decision situations and in the absence of special guidance, Christians are to act wisely and prayerfully, mindful of the relationship each has with God. This is the thesis of Willard, that Christians should make decisions in relationship with God and that, sometimes, God's individual will for a believer may be to simply choose for themselves.⁷ It is important to note that choice involves not only the action, but also the intention. The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went to the temple to pray shows two men doing something that is right, but one goes with the intention to boast, while the other goes with the intention of humbling himself.⁸ This paper does not address this important issue of intention, only the process and act of choosing.

⁵ Much of Proverbs 1-9.

⁶ James 1:5-7.

⁷ Dallas Willard, *In Search of Guidance: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

⁸ Luke 18:9-14.

What, then, are these non-moral choices? They are choices where Scripture gives no specific guidance. They can be minor choices, such as, “What shirt shall I wear today?” or they can be major choices such as, “Where shall I go for Masters level study?” Much writing on Christian decision making provides little practical guidance for these types of choices, choices that Christians regularly make every day.⁹ That is unfortunate and can give the impression that once all the theological issues have been dealt with and a Christian is ‘free to choose,’ the choice should be easy and/or obvious. Where does this ‘wisdom’ that Christians use to make wise choices actually come from? In general, wise Christians have learned from God and his Word, from other people and from their own experiences. The remaining sections of the paper focus how to become wise(r) in decision making through learning from others, which indirectly is also a gift from God.

The Perception of the Decision Situation

Salespeople have a certain skill in asking questions. For example, “Would you prefer me to come on Monday, or is Wednesday more convenient?” The way the question is framed by implicitly eliminating the option to say, “No, I don’t want to meet you,” strongly shapes the answer and therefore the choice. To put it simply, the question often influences the answer. This phenomenon, known as ‘framing’, has been investigated by Tversky and Kahneman, among others, where they designed experiments in which students chose from two alternatives and they found that, depending on how the questions were asked, different answers were chosen¹⁰.

An Israeli colleague furnished an example of framing from his own experience. As a professor at a university, he needed a car to get to and from his office. Cars were very expensive in Israel, so he had carefully selected five cars that were different from each other in terms of purchase cost, reliability, petrol consumption and resale value. Which to choose? He had almost reached a decision when he realized that his decision was not about cars – his decision was about transportation. Therefore, many other possibilities arose including using a bus or a taxi, sharing a car with a colleague, and having his wife sometimes take him to the office. He had reframed his decision problem and in so doing had created many

⁹ Rae is one exception, presenting a simple model for making non-moral decisions. Scott B Rae, *Moral Choices*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 104–106.

¹⁰ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice,” *Science* 211, no. 4481 (1981): 453–458.

more possible courses of action (alternatives) to choose from. While reframing may appear obvious in hindsight, it requires considerable effort to reflect carefully on the situation in order to see it differently. Therefore, before choosing, a decision maker should ask, “Am I asking the right question? Is there another way to see this situation?”

In 1895 Joseph Malins wrote a poem entitled “The Fence or the Ambulance”¹¹ about a small town that was facing a problem. The town offered wonderful views from the top of the cliff; however, a small number of visitors had begun falling down the cliff. The township authorities responded quickly and established an ambulance service to help the injured visitors. While the ambulance service was a commendable action, it neither solved nor addressed why people were falling down the cliff. They were falling down because the fence at the top of the cliff was broken in several places. If the question asked is, “How can we help these injured people?” then an ambulance service is one appropriate response – a wise choice given the question. But if a different question is asked as to why people are falling down the cliff, a wise choice is to investigate the cause which can lead to a choice or action that addresses the real problem of the broken fence and, in so doing, renders the ambulance service unnecessary¹². Making wise choices must involve being able to look at the decision situation from different perspectives.

In summary, the way a decision situation is perceived and understood, will significantly affect the choices made. If, for instance, a Christian leader perceives leadership from a stewardship perspective, that perception will influence the choices that he makes. If another Christian leader sees leadership as about achieving goals and tasks, that will influence her choices in a different way. Any Christian facing an important decision should pause and consider if there are different ways to perceive the decision situation.

¹¹ Joseph Malins, “The Fence or the Ambulance,” *Iowa Health Bulletin*, 1912, accessed August 8, 2017, <https://www.iowapha.org/Resources/Documents/PHM+Winter+2011-2012+The+Fence+or+the+Ambulance.pdf>.

¹² Argyris identifies single loop solutions as reacting to a problem but not dealing with the cause; in our example this is the ambulance service. Double loop solutions address the problem cause; fixing the fence. Again, it is the way the question is asked, the way the decision is framed, which influences the choice. C. Argyris, “Teaching Smart People How to Learn,” *Harvard Business Review* 69, no. 3 (1991): 99–109.

The Process of Choosing

The abundance of published literature on decision making and choice tends to fall into three categories: normative (what people should do), prescriptive (what people could do) and descriptive (what people actually do). Normative approaches are deductive, starting from a set of assumptions about how people should think – such as the definition of rational behavior in economics where decision makers are expected to be rational utility maximizers¹³. Prescriptive approaches typically adapt normative approaches to accommodate the non-rational behaviors of decision makers¹⁴. More helpful for our purposes are descriptive models of decision making which will be discussed after exploring the process of decision making. Every decision involves a process and the actual choice comes at the end of the process, however short or long it may be. In its simplest form, decision making involves a process (what happens before the choice) and outcomes or consequences (what happens after the choice).

Consider the following situation. A Myanmar student has been awarded a scholarship to study in America, in a small university town. His accommodation with a friend is some five miles from the university, there is no public transport and cycling is impossible in the winter weather. One day, as he walks home, he sees a car for sale. The price is almost equal to a small gift his auntie gave him. He calls the number, visits the owner, and buys the car for the price asked. For the next two years of study, this car is excellent. It is reliable, economical and sells for a fair price two years later. Was that a good decision?

Replay the decision. The student sees the car for sale, visits the owner and arranges for a friend who works with cars to come and inspect the car. The friend says the brakes need fixing, but otherwise the car appears in good condition. The student negotiates a much lower price and buys the car. For the next two years of study, this car is terrible. It is unreliable, costing all his remaining money to repair and the resale value is low. Was that a good decision?

In the first case, although the outcome was good, the process was bad because the student did not evaluate the condition of car or get someone experienced

¹³ For example, Ralph L. Keeney and Howard Raiffa, *Decisions with Multiple Objectives: Preference and Value Tradeoffs* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

¹⁴ Prospect Theory is one such prescriptive theory, explained in the previously cited article; Tversky and Kahneman, “The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice.”

to do that. In the second case, the process was much better, even though the outcome was bad. As decision makers, while we can control the process, we use to make a decision, we have much less control over the outcomes. Yet often people evaluate their decisions based on whether the outcome was good, not on whether they had a good process. Henig and Buchanan argue that this is a faulty logic¹⁵. A good decision process should (in general, but not always) result in a good outcome and they discuss what constitutes a good decision process.

What, then, is a good decision process¹⁶? Every decision process involves two essential components - objectives and alternatives., Objectives (often referred to as criteria or goals) are what we want, things that are important to us and that will influence our choice. Common objectives include maximizing satisfaction or wealth, minimizing risk or cost, and minimizing regret¹⁷, among many others. Alternatives are simply different courses of action that we can choose from, each of which can be expected to have different outcomes and will achieve our objectives to different degrees. For example, when choosing among, say, five different Bible colleges for further study, our objectives may include cost, reputation, and location. Rarely will one single alternative (that is, one college) give the best result across every objective. A good decision process will evaluate the different colleges against the objectives.

The literature on descriptive decision-making processes provides considerable practical advice for making wise choices, and for avoiding bad choices, as will now be discussed based on the work of Nutt, Corner, Simon and Lipschitz.

In a large study in corporate America, Nutt interviewed some 160 senior managers on how they made decisions, then validated this information provided by those senior managers through interviews with each manager's colleagues¹⁸. He identified four distinct decision processes: Idea, Issue, Objective-directed and Reframing processes. Idea processes can be thought of as solutions looking for a

¹⁵ Mordecai I. Henig and John T. Buchanan, "Solving MCDM Problems: Process Concepts," *Journal of Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis* 5, no. 1 (1996): 3–21.

¹⁶ Used here, "good" does not refer to good as in a moral sense. Rather it reflects the idea that a decision process that follows these guidelines should be much better than if they were not followed.

¹⁷ Minimizing regret means choosing alternatives so that you will not regret not choosing them.

¹⁸ Paul C. Nutt, "The Formulation Processes and Tactics Used in Organizational Decision-Making," *Organization Science* 4, no. 2 (1993): 226–251.

problem, where someone has an idea and it needs to be justified. Issue processes typically arise from a problem that needs to be solved and the process is to search for the best alternative to address that particular issue or problem. Objective-directed processes begin with objectives, clarifying what is important, what are our goals, in making the decision; then alternatives that enable the goals to be chosen are discussed. Finally, reframing processes are about perception, investigating what the real problem is, as discussed in Section 3. Table 1 shows Nutt's evaluation of the frequency of use and relative success of these four processes¹⁹.

PROCESS	Percentage Use	Success Ranking
Issue	26%	4 th
Idea	33%	3 rd
Objective-Directed	29%	2 nd
Reframing	12%	1 st

Table 1 Summary of Nutt's four decision processes

Not surprisingly, reframing is the most successful, but the least common for two reasons: many decisions situations cannot be reframed, and many decision makers are unaware of how to do reframing. The other three processes are almost equally common but differ in terms of success. Nutt's research suggests that to start with objectives is a better process. This conclusion is applicable across different cultures and contexts as one should always be aware of what they are trying to achieve (objectives) when making a decision.

Other literature also supports an objective-directed process, notably Keeney's book on Value-focused Thinking. (VFT) which presents a persuasive argument for starting with values/objectives.²⁰ Corner et al. extend the VFT approach as shown in Figure 1.²¹ Here the decision process is viewed dynamically,

¹⁹ "Success" means the success of the decision as assessed by the manager interviewed and by his or her colleagues. That is to say, it is a subjective measure of the extent to which the desired outcome was achieved and the value or quality of the outcome.

²⁰ Ralph L. Keeney, *Value Focused Thinking* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²¹ Jim Corner, John Buchanan, and Mordecai Henig, "Dynamic Decision Problem Structuring," *Journal of Multi-Criteria Decision Analysis* 10 (2001): 129-141.

typically beginning with values, where those values help identify alternatives (alternative focused thinking – AFT), which in turn clarify the values and so on. The point here is that a good decision process will iterate between AFT and VFT, and these authors suggest that it is better to start with values/objectives, which was also Nutt’s conclusion.

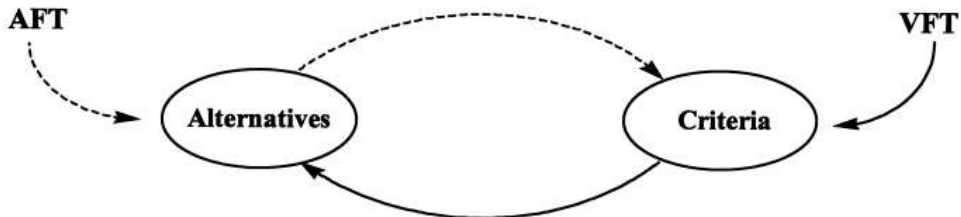


Figure 1 A dynamic approach to problem structuring (Corner et al., p 133)

On a more cautionary note, the descriptive research of Simon suggests that most decision makers ‘satisfice’, that is, they stop searching for alternatives as soon as they have found an acceptable solution.²² Satisficing is realistic in a complex world, but to stop looking too quickly may result in “missing out” on better alternatives.

Finally, the work of Lipshitz identifies three modes of decision making referred to as consequential choice, matching and re-assessment.²³ Matching is an extension of Simon’s satisficing, where a decision maker chooses the first alternative that ‘matches’ what they are looking for. Re-assessment is like Nutt’s reframing. Consequential choice involves assessing the expected consequences of the alternatives against the objectives or criteria of the decision maker; it recognizes that every alternative has consequences and requires a decision maker to carefully consider all possible consequences of each alternative.

Before summarizing these findings regarding how to make wise choices, two further topics are addressed: the concept of unintended consequences and human behavioral decision-making biases. Unintended consequences (or outcomes), by virtue of their name, are often overlooked, as Tenner has explained in the context of technology.²⁴ Returning to the Myanmar orphanage example, the

²² H.A. Simon, “Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment,” *Psychological Review* 63, no. 2 (1956): 129–138.

²³ Raanan Lipshitz, “Decision Making in Three Modes,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 24, no. 1 (1994): 47–65.

²⁴ For example, Tenner discusses the unintended consequence of repetitive strain injury (RSI) for typists since the move from manual typewriters to the faster and easier computer keyboards.

growth of orphanages has had several unintended consequences.²⁵ These include a shift from orphanages as a place of care to orphanages as a business; parents sending children to orphanages for education (hence a significant proportion of children in orphanages are not actually orphans²⁶), thereby encouraging the growth of orphanages; and the trauma experienced by children growing up separated from their family. There is no easy way to foresee unintended consequences. However, an awareness that they will occur can help decision makers think more carefully about the consequences of their choices.

Human behavioral biases can also contribute to poor choices. Hammond et al. provide a thorough explanation of these biases.²⁷ For example, one common bias is about “concrete” information. For example, assume you want to buy a car. You find a recent survey of 1,000 people which shows that Toyota is the most preferred model and overall has one of the lowest maintenance costs. However, your uncle tells you that he bought a Toyota one year ago and he had to pay a lot of money to repair it. What information do you use to help you make your decision? Your uncle (a sample of one, but whom you know personally), or the results of a survey of 1,000 people you have never met. Many people are biased toward concrete information (the uncle) rather than abstract information (a survey of 1,000 people). A brief and clear pictorial explanation of 20 common behavioral biases is also provided by Liferhacker²⁸.

In summary, a good decision process should lead to wiser choices. A number of decision processes have been discussed based on descriptive research, which is more helpful than the normative and prescriptive approaches to decision

He adds that for those with RSI, the newer technology of voice recognition has resulted in some people losing their voices. Edward Tenner, *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

²⁵ Bunkers et al. provide a wealth of research on the impact (and unintended consequences) of orphanages. Kelly Bunkers et al., “Key Research on Orphanages and Family Care: An Annotated Bibliography,” July 2014, accessed August 9, 2017, <http://faithtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Key-Research-Annotated-Bibliography.pdf>.

²⁶ Personal communication with a colleague who has been working closely with a number of orphanages in Myanmar to enable children to reunite with their (wider) family. 2017.

²⁷ John S Hammond, Ralph L Keeney, and Howard Raiffa, “The Hidden Traps in Decision Making,” in *Making Smart Decisions* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2011), 1–27.

²⁸ Also, Liferhacker provides a clear explanation and example of 20 behavioral biases. Business Insider, “20 Cognitive Biases That Screw up Your Decisions,” *Liferhacker*, 2015, accessed September 19, 2015, <http://liferhacker.com/this-graphic-explains-20-cognitive-biases-that-affect-y-1730901381>.

making, because it addresses the reality of decision making, not the ideal. A good decision process, then, will include careful consideration of objectives, alternatives and expected outcomes or consequences, with a focus on objective-directed and reframing processes rather than issue, idea and matching processes. Furthermore, an awareness of common human decision-making biases should also enhance the quality of decisions. There are many opportunities to apply these recommendations to decision making in Christian ministry contexts. It will likely take more time but should result in wiser choices.

Principles of Decision Making

In addition to the discussion in the previous section of what comprises a good decision process, seven principles are discussed below.

Pray for wisdom.

In any non-trivial decision, this is the appropriate place for a Christian to begin the process of making any decision. This is not intended as a request for God to tell the believer what to do, rather it is a recognition that God is the giver of wisdom; wisdom which is often given through the agency of other people and their experience.

All decisions have consequences.

Simply put, a decision maker must recognize that their decisions will have consequences or outcomes. What can happen is that one consequence dominates the mind of the decision maker and some of the unexpected and often negative consequences are not considered²⁹. And worse, sometimes we just do what we want,

²⁹ For example, Muang reports on an alcohol abuse problem in Thantlang township in Chin State. Christian leaders sought to address this problem by buying the two liquor store licenses and closing them down. The expected consequence that dominated their thinking was that if the alcohol source was cut off, then the problem should disappear. Unfortunately, there were many unexpected consequences, such as home brewing of poor-quality alcohol that killed people, people importing liquor from the nearest town and making more money, to the extent that even the police became somewhat corrupt. In the end the liquor stores were reopened, and the situation improved. According to Mang, the money that was spent on buying the licenses, is now spent on education and other preventative measures. Cung Lian Mang, "Sociological and Pastoral Response to the Problems of Alcoholism in the Thantlang Community" (MTh diss., Myanmar Evangelical Graduate School of Theology, 2016).

with no consideration of the consequences. The next three principles relate to this principle.

Decisions are always about the future.

While this is obvious, the implication is that a decision maker will never know the outcome of their decision until after the decision has been made. Therefore, all decisions are fundamentally an act of faith – for all humans, not only Christians. Every decision is, to a greater or lesser extent, a leap of faith. The underlying idea is that commitment comes before knowledge; first you commit by making a choice and acting on it, then you know what happens. For example, you know if a chair will hold you up only after you have sat in it.

You are responsible for your decisions.

No one else is responsible for your decisions. It is easy to take responsibility for decisions with good outcomes, while some decision makers prefer to blame other people or circumstances for decisions with bad outcomes. Even if a Christian is clearly guided by God in a decision, they are still responsible for their decision and for its consequences.

You cannot make good decisions without good information.

Good information is accurate, timely and relevant. For example, if I want to take a bus to Mawlamyine and I ask someone which is the Mawlamyine bus and I get on the bus he indicates, and I go to sleep and wake up in Taunggyi, clearly that was not good information. It was inaccurate. Before making a decision, it is important to be sure that the information you will use to make your decision is accurate and relevant, and timely in the sense that you obtain the necessary information before making a choice.

Doing nothing is a decision.

It is naïve to think that a decision can be avoided by inaction, by choosing to do nothing. Of course, it may be wise to postpone making a choice until, for instance, you gather more information. Nonetheless, it is still a choice to postpone deciding, which will have its own (hopefully good) consequences, and for which the decision maker is still responsible.

Beliefs and preferences should be kept separate.

In other words, a decision maker should not let what they want to happen (their preferred outcome) override what they know is most likely to happen. For example, people often buy lottery tickets based on preference—that is, they want to win. But anyone with a little knowledge of statistics believes that, on average, they will lose money on every lottery ticket they buy. It is not difficult to fool oneself by making the consequences or outcomes to be what one wants them to be and thereby justifying their choice.

Conclusion

To be alive requires choice. All our choices shape us, so that we are truly the product of our choices. Therefore, all choices are important. Of course, there will be significant choices to be made but, overall, these are few compared with the many choices we make daily. And thus, it is the regular daily choices that will largely shape our character.

The paper has focused on practical wisdom for those decision situations where there is freedom for a Christian to choose a course of action where God has not specifically guided, and where there is no contravention of God's moral will as revealed in Scripture. It is possible to improve our decision-making skills. It is important how we see our decisions, for a different perception can result in a different and possibly better choice. The focus of wisdom here is not simply on achieving a good outcome or result, but rather knowing that the way we have gone about making our choice has itself been a wise process. Wisdom is not simply seen in the outcome of our choices; it is also essential in the process of choosing.

As Iyengar³⁰ has observed, choosing is an art involving our intuition and our feelings. However, it is also a science, involving rational and disciplined thinking. This paper has sought to bring wisdom to bear on the decision-making situation where God has not specifically guided and therefore a Christian has freedom to choose. Unsurprisingly, this is the context of many of the decisions that we make.

³⁰ Iyengar, *The Art of Choosing*.