

TOUGH CALLS: DIFFICULT DECISIONS IN A DIFFICULT WORLD



UNWELCOME
DECISIONS

Leanne Cheng

MAKING DECISIONS:
WHAT TO DO OR
WHO TO BE?

Barbara Deutschmann

'THE NEXT THYNGE':
OBEYING GOD AND
DECIDING WELL

Heather Carmichael

THE CHURCH'S
MOST URGENT
NEED

Aileen Teh



Woman (Hebrew *ishah*). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

Not all humans are called upon to make decisions. Some remain at a pre-intentional stage from infancy, with others deciding for them. Nonetheless, for all of us, decision making will make and mark our lives. Someone will choose for us or we will choose for ourselves. We will decide to do or not to do but even more significantly we will decide how we should decide. When choice is denied us we will still have to decide how we will think and act towards those who prevent us from deciding.

Because we long for certainty and simplicity it is tempting to believe that the Christian gospel promises us just that when we come to decide about something. Or perhaps we are tormented by the idea that we must be absolutely sure about a decision if we are to be obedient to God. Somehow the 'Will of God' for us is separate to, rather than clothed in, our circumstances and personalities and we want to believe that making the right decision would eliminate risk.

"Let us make human beings in our own image" said God (Genesis 1:26 NIV) and that decision, creative and risky, was ultimately very costly for him. It has been worked out in all of human history with pain and struggle but will, we Christians believe, ultimately end very well. That is our faith.

In this issue our writers look at how Christian women might decide well. We are urged to be reflective and brave, and to think corporately and globally, mindful of decision making as the privilege and responsibility it is. We hope the articles prompt some lively and helpful discussion.

Fran Boydell.

ISSUES TO COME...

ISSUE 12:
In the image
of God

ISSUE 13:
Refugees:
Aliens and
strangers

our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

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Making decisions: *What to do or who to be?*

BY BARBARA DEUTSCHMANN

There was a time early in my marriage when I seriously considered whether to have children. With heroic individualism, I surveyed all my options, weighing up pros and cons. It all seems a joke now, after 26 years of strenuous child-rearing, but I remember the feeling well. I was the original Enlightenment woman. Birth control technology had given me the choice to be married and to be childless. Wealth had given me the option to live to old age without needing children to support me. Education had given me the self-awareness to want to choose.

It is easy to see why decision-making is a key topic for a Christian women's magazine like this one. We do an awful lot of it. For Western women, technology, wealth and education have opened options inconceivable to earlier generations. We can choose to marry or not, to be childless or to parent. We can choose a partner, a career, a lifestyle, a hobby. It is worth reminding ourselves that most women in the world have no such dilemmas. Poverty, lack of education and restrictive cultural boundaries greatly reduce the choices. Choosing from a variety of options is the happy lot of a small minority of women. Decision-making is the privilege of Western elites.

► The consumer chooser

Why, then, does this privilege cause us discomfort? One reason is that modern life throws up too many choices. There are just too many to be made. Choice is the potent lever of consumerism. Companies woo us with choice and invite us to find our place in society through what we choose. The amount and quality of choice divides sheep from goats. Consider recent advertising for an airline business class. The lucky passenger can choose what to watch, when to eat, when to sleep. Those in economy class cannot choose.

Our frequent decisions as consumers soften us up to think of ourselves as consumers in other, more serious areas of life. Consider the choices regarding our sexuality. Do we marry, partner or stay single? If we stay single will we choose to have sexual relationships? Do we engage in same-sex relationships? Do we have children? If we marry unhappily, do we stay married? Decisions that were not options for our grandmothers and are not options for third-world women are available to us, relatively free of stigma and reproach.

► The burden of choice

Another reason for our discomfort is that life throws up choices which have huge implications. Consider the woman who is offered an abortion because pre-natal

tests have shown her third baby to be her third child with coeliac disease, or the woman who must decide about the future of her frozen embryos following the death of her partner. No amount of counselling can relieve the burden of these choices. We suspect that we ought not to have to make such decisions, that they are too big for us and that we lack the tools to make them.

How do we navigate these shoals of decisions? How do we sort them, understand them, make them? The first step is to realise that most of the decisions we are called to make have their origin in the cultural framework of Western society. They are thrown up by a world-view whose centre-piece is the proud individual with sovereign rights and with the technology to make things happen. This world-view has shifted God and the Bible not just out of the spotlight, but totally off the stage. The fact that we feel we must make a decision is to buy into a world-view which has displaced God. Take, for example, the anecdote with which this article began. I now see the process of deciding about children as a temptation of a piece with that which confronted Christ in the wilderness. It was the world framing the questions in its own terms. While the world may throw up good reasons why it seems wise not to have children, Christians do not let the world determine their view of the future. We have children as a sign of our hope in God for the future. Children are not our hope, God is. That I thought that I must choose to have children was to swallow two big lies. The first was to think I was not part of the Christian story. The second was to think that I could make this decision on my own. Let's look at these two lies one at a time.

► The moving train

When we become Christians, we become aware that we are part of a story which began long ago. As C.S. Lewis has said, "we jump on a moving train". To think that we have lots of individual decisions to make is to ignore the story of which we are a part and the community into which we are grafted. The story began at creation and while we do not know how close is the end, we know that God's purposeful history is taking us to the renewal of heaven and earth. This does not make the concerns and questions of this world fade away. Far from it. It requires our active participation and engagement. But it does mean that some of the questions are no longer "What will I do?" but become "Who will we be?"

What difference does it make, for instance, to our choices about sexuality to hear from the Bible that humankind reflects the image of God in the mutuality of two genders, to know that marriage is founded on this truth or to know that in the renewed creation, marriage

is transcended by singleness? As we listen to the story of who God is, how he has made us and who we are to be, some of our questions fade away.

And what difference does it make to our questions about work to know that the chief end of humankind is to glorify God and enjoy him forever? What difference does this make to our appreciation of disabled people or even to the definition of abled and disabled? And what difference does it make to our lifestyle to know of the mutual responsibility shown in parts of Old Testament law, such as the fiftieth year release of debt (jubilee) principle (Deuteronomy 15)?

I raise these as questions because, although the principles are clear, the practical results may not be and will require working out. The point is this: we must learn to listen to who we are according to the Bible story, take our cues from that and not from the story which the Western world-view conveys. This will require a commitment to reading the Bible, both the separate books and the theological themes which hold it together. We also need to read it together, men and women.

► Show-casing a new people

Western culture also feeds us a lie when it insists on our right and responsibility to make individual decisions. We have taken hold of this, hook, line and sinker. We have lost sight of ourselves as people-in-community together show-casing the new people of God. We read each 'you' in the New Testament as singular and sing choruses featuring the "perpendicular pronoun". It will take a seismic shift in Western church culture to change this orientation. When Jesus moved away from the crowds, sat down and taught his disciples in the words we know as the Sermon on the Mount, he was not instructing them in individual ethics but, rather, teaching them to imagine themselves a new people, a new community, one whose characteristics

were meekness, mercy, peaceableness, forgiveness, truthfulness, purity. For the empowering and purification of this community, he went to the cross. For its vindication, he was raised, and for its ongoing mission, he carries. Just as the people of God in the Old Testament were meant to show-case what it means to be in covenant relationship to God, so the church is meant to model an alternative community.

One of the implications of this is that decisions about how we live and how we apply Biblical truths to the questions we face, could be made together. I know of a couple in another country who faced a question about a possible abortion. Prenatal testing had revealed an abnormal foetus. Feeling strongly that this was a question for their Christian community, they called the elders together to help them discern the way forward. The church then was aware of its responsibility to help the family with care of this child. This approach to decision-making is not just for ethical dilemmas but also for other life questions such as use of time and money. I know of one group who shared information about their income and made budget decisions together. It is this kind of honesty that the early church was striving for (Acts 4:32-5:11).

Such processes do not come easily to us for they involve levels of disclosure and trust that strike hard against our individualism. But in this way we can learn to live as members of a community that plants signs of the new world in the ruins of the old. Ultimately, our decision-making becomes distilled into the primary question: Who will we be?

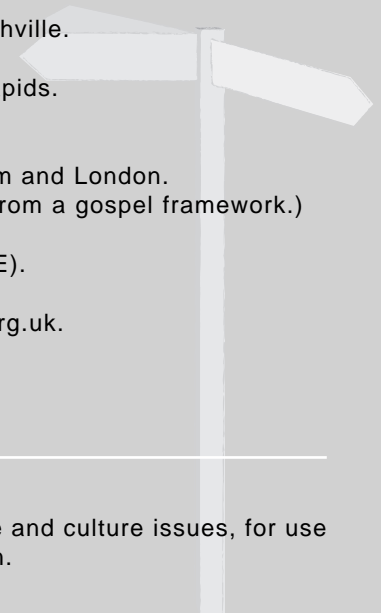
■ *Barbara Deutschmann works in the Projects Department of TEAR Australia and attends St Mark's Anglican Church Spotswood. She can be contacted at fieldworkers@tear.org.au.*

SOME RELATED READING...

- > Hauerwas, S & Willimon, W.H. (1989) *Resident Aliens*. Abingdon Press: Nashville.
- > Newbigin, L. (1989) *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids. (These are good basic introductions to gospel and world-view issues.)
- > Hauerwas, S. (2001) *The Hauerwas Reader*. Duke University Press: Durham and London. (A useful compendium of writings about many different contemporary issues from a gospel framework.)
- > Publications by Zadok and by the Centre for Applied Christian Ethics (CACE).
- > The website of The Gospel and Our Culture Network: www.gospel-culture.org.uk. (Interesting articles about particular issues.)

BIBLE STUDIES FOR GROUPS...

- > The Newbigin Group is producing a set of six Bible studies introducing Bible and culture issues, for use by groups. They will be available in May 2004. Contact Barbara Deutschmann.



'The Next Thyng': Obeying God & Deciding Well

BY HEATHER CARMICHAEL

There is no doubt in my mind that personality plays a significant part in the level of difficulty experienced in making decisions, but for a Christian there are very definite helps to the process. I illustrate this with reference to my own life path as a prematurely retired cross-cultural missionary doctor.

The first and most obvious help available to the Christian (of whatever gender!) is the Bible. I first became a Christian because a passage in the Bible 'spoke' to me that I was a sinner in need of Christ for redemption. By 'spoke' I mean I had that 'ah-hah' feeling described in psychology when a person suddenly apprehends the truth of something. At the same time I recognised the truth of this I also 'felt' (another inner conviction) that I should be a missionary in order to tell others about this wonderful insight that I had just received. It seemed a commonsense response to such an important issue and it was obviously a career choice that was acceptable to God.

The Bible provides us with general guidelines but for many issues there are no specific teachings to guide us. One of these areas is in choice of occupation. Was it critical to God's work in this world that I became a missionary doctor? Could he have managed to get by if I had taken another path? My belief is that God's Kingdom work happens through us by the way we live and work wherever and whatever we might do. The quantity of teaching in the Bible on the 'how' of living suggests to me that this is of more importance than the 'what'.

God has promised to show us the way and has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us. Thus I feel confident

that God will point me in the right direction provided I am open to the various possibilities and haven't already made up my mind. I think the way he does this is usually through natural means rather than supernatural. For example, through our recognition of our natural talents and choosing a career that will use them, or simply using common sense. As the old Puritan saying has it "Do the next thyng". God is our creator and has given us each specific talents, not to mention a brain, and it seems safe to assume he did this with the intention that we should use them.

This is not to say that God does not choose specific people for specific tasks. However, I believe that when that happens God makes it unmistakably clear. Perhaps the best example of this is Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. With my decision to be a missionary it seemed as right then as it does now 40 years later but I have never felt I could say, "God has told me to be a missionary". It was and remained an inner conviction that was supported by others and by events.

I know now some of the mixed motives in that decision and know that even in right decisions there will be mixed motives. Thus I am uneasy when I hear someone say "God told me to do such and such", given that they are usually referring to subjective feelings as opposed to something as concrete as Paul's experience. A good grasp of the sort of things God desires hopefully results in 'hearing' things in line with his will but to suggest inner conviction equates with a direct objective word from God seems naïve and presumptuous to me.

The other major help we have comes from other Christians. In my case I 'tried out' my calling through

some short-term assignments both to see if I could do it and to see if others thought I was suitable. I also trusted that the mission society would refuse my application if it were not the correct path for me to be taking.

Of course, sometimes we don't have the luxury of deciding what we will do. In my case a serious illness necessitated my return to Australia and remains a major limiting factor in my life with no likelihood of ever being able to return to my overseas work again. How does this reconcile with my inner conviction that God wanted me to do mission work? Was I wrong or did he just change his mind? I think Ecclesiastes has the answer here – there is a time and place for everything. My time as a missionary was obviously something God could have extended had it been essential for his work. He didn't do so and now I must "do the next thyng" here in order to follow him as best I can.

In summary, I rest in the belief in God's overall control (his sovereignty) and his desire to for me live rightly and productively for his Kingdom wherever and in whatever state I am. I also take comfort in God's mercy. He knows our weaknesses and through Christ he is ready to forgive us if we make a bad decision. This is not to presume on his grace by not bothering to think through decisions. While we may be forgiven, we and others may well have to bear the earthly consequences of that bad decision - but it does remove some of the angst from the process.

■ *Heather Carmichael is a doctor currently working in travel medicine. Formerly, she spent 18 years with Interserve working in community development in Pakistan. She is a member of St Jude's, Carlton.*

THE CHURCH'S MOST URGENT NEED

BY AILEEN TEH

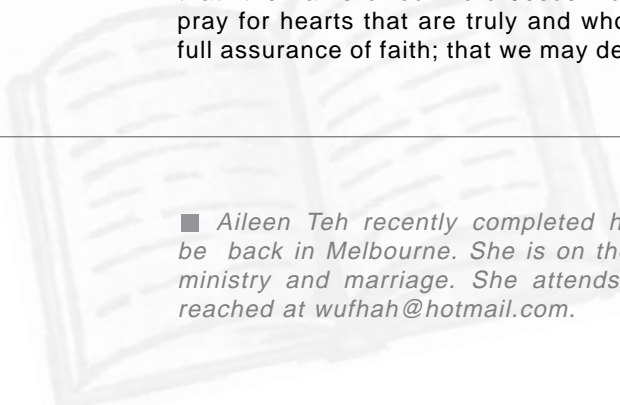
BOOK REVIEW

Carson, D. A. (1992) *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers*. Baker Books (Michigan) and Inter-Varsity Press (United Kingdom).

A careful and prayerful reading of Don Carson's *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* leads to the conclusion that it is indeed good and pleasing in God's sight to pray continually with all kinds of requests and petitions. But more than that, Carson takes the reader through the richness that is to be found in Paul's prayers, and uncovers the depth of the apostle's petitions. He starts with the proposition that just as God's word must reform our theology, our ethics, and our practices, so also must it reform our praying. By examining the Scriptures to discern such priorities as praying for power (Ephesians 3:16, 18) and for a knowledge and demonstration of God's love (Ephesians 3:18-19; Philippians 1:9), Paul's concerns are shown to be wider than our own usually are. They go beyond asking for jobs or physical healing. The reader is encouraged to think more broadly about the other things that he or she ought to be praying for (whether for self or for the church) - fruits of the Spirit that lead to perseverance and encouragement to press on toward the final goal of our heavenly dwelling.

Carson's approach is personal, yet challenging. He does an excellent job of addressing the struggles and weaknesses that so often hinder faithfulness in prayer. It is difficult for the reader to escape the probing questions that pepper each chapter. Ultimately, it is clear that God's word is the perfect standard by which we need to critically evaluate our own prayer lives. In so doing, the reader is not only made to reflect on their personal prayers, but also on their level of spiritual maturity. For it is Carson's contention that "one of the basic demonstrations that we do know God, is prayer - spiritual, persistent, biblically minded prayer". What we pray for reflects how well we know who we are praying to.

As Christian women whose lives are increasingly filled with numerous responsibilities and commitments, the need and urgency for regular, persistent communion with God is evident. All too often we find ourselves swept up in a whirlwind of activities and inevitably fail to take the time to call upon our Maker, to find out what His ways are. Carson exhorts the reader to "pause for fuel" and not to "neglect their calling to the ministry of the Word and prayer". And, in consistently and faithfully exercising these spiritual disciplines, Carson expects that our prayers will be accompanied by a conscious longing "that the answer bring glory to God". It then becomes necessary for us to ask ourselves: is God at the centre of our praying? Do we, as Christ's own, pray constantly and with the desire that "the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified" (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12)? May we pray for hearts that are truly and wholly able to draw near to God with sincerity and the full assurance of faith; that we may delight in doing so, no matter what our circumstances.



■ Aileen Teh recently completed her legal training in Malaysia and is now glad to be back in Melbourne. She is on the threshold of a new life involving the law, student ministry and marriage. She attends Croydon Hills Presbyterian Church. She can be reached at wufhah@hotmail.com.

Unwelcome Decisions

BY LEANNE CHENG

These days we are forever being reminded to be prepared. We have calendars, diaries, year planners and palm pilots. We are told to invest in our financial future, save for our children's education and plan for our retirement. Recent television ads have even urged us to plan our own funeral. All of these require careful thought and decision making. However, it seems that no matter how much we prepare, we are powerless to stop those things that take us completely by surprise, the things that attach themselves to our lives unplanned and unwanted.

For me, one such moment came two days before my wedding, as I sat across from my doctor and heard the devastating words: "Your chances of falling pregnant naturally are practically nil." I suddenly found myself up close and personal with a whole range of issues that I had previously only thought about with smug detachment. Issues such as: When did life begin and end? Were we meant to have children? Was God punishing us? I felt overwhelmed by the decisions before us. Should we do fertility treatment? Foster? Adopt? If we had fertility treatment, what was acceptable to God? How much money were we willing to spend on having a child?

As my husband and I started our marriage and our quest to become parents we were faced with many difficult and complicated decisions. Below are some of the principles that were important in our decision-making process. Some I did straight away, some took me a while to learn and some are a daily challenge.

> WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

As a Christian this may seem obvious, however when I first started thinking about fertility treatment I wondered what the Bible could say about such modern medical issues as In Vitro Fertilisation, Gamete Intra-fallopian Transfer and Ovulation Induction. I spent months searching out Christian perspectives but found little helpful information. Finally, I opened my Bible and searched for everything I could find on infertility, children, and families. While it's true I didn't find a chapter on reproductive technologies, what I did find was far more helpful. I found a God who knows us and loves us from the time we are conceived.

A God who created and values families. I realised God saw me, not as incomplete, but as his precious child. I met many women who, like me, longed for a child and a God who understood their pain even when others didn't.

While the Bible didn't give me all the answers, it did give me a framework of beliefs from which to start working out the hard decisions. It also enabled my husband and I to be more in united our decision-making process as we better understood the issues from God's perspective.

> TAKE THE TIME TO MAKE A GOOD DECISION

On the infertility roller coaster it was easy to find ourselves pressured into making quick decisions but whenever possible we tried to make decisions according to a timeline that suited us rather than others. Even before we started treatment my husband and I spent many months reading, talking with other people, praying and discussing the issues. In doing this we were able to reach unified decisions away from the influence of pushy doctors and mood-altering fertility medications. As we went through treatment this made each decision we were faced with easier and less emotional. Taking time gave us perspective and clarity and enabled us to be sure about the decisions we were making.

> CHOOSE THE OPINIONS YOU LISTEN TO

When we first started telling people about our trouble conceiving I was amazed by the things people said to us. Although there was a clear physical reason for my infertility, few people treated it as a medical condition. Instead people told me this was God's way of telling us that we were not meant to have children or that my infertility was a result of bad relationships with our parents. It seemed everyone had an opinion on the rights and wrongs of fertility treatment and on what we should do.

Listening to everyone made me feel upset and confused. Instead, we chose to focus on a handful of people whose judgment we trusted and valued. These were people whose Christian opinion we respected, people who knew us well or who had faced the same

decisions we were facing. These people helped guide us through the complex issues, provided an outside perspective or just offered a much-needed box of tissues.

> PRAY

Prayer has always been a vital component both in our decision-making process and in our daily lives. It is in prayer that we communicate with God and sustain our relationship with him. Through prayer we can ask for what we need and thank him for who he is. My prayers have not always been gracious, I have cried, pleaded and yelled at God. I have repented, asked for forgiveness and I have just sat when no words would come. I have had many prayers answered – some I am still waiting for. The apostle Paul said "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4: 6-7).

> REMEMBER THAT GOD IS IN CONTROL

When we lived in Darwin I would go each morning to the pool. As I swam laps I would cry into the water and plead with God to let me be a mother. I would try

to bargain with him – if he would just let me get pregnant I would be a better Christian/read my Bible every day/become a missionary. Although I know now that this is a common part of the grieving process at the time I just felt out of control. I felt so much pain and yet there was nothing I could do to change the situation. Rather than struggle against that I had to learn to accept it. I realised that it wasn't important that I be in control but to trust that God is in control. Regardless of how much I read the Bible, regardless of the treatment we did or didn't do, regardless of whether I became a mother or not – God is in control.

Through the past five years we have been asked many times "After all you've been through how can you still trust in God?" Our answer has always been the same - "How can we not?" If we endeavour to see things from God's perspective and honour him above our own desires our decision-making can only reflect our relationship with him.

■ *Leanne Cheng attends St John's Anglican Church in Upper Beaconsfield where she is involved in children's ministry and young adults' ministry. She and her husband are in the process of adopting a child from Asia.*

Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.

Idol Worship

I'm sure I'm not the only person who barracked for Guy Sebastian on *Australia Idol* simply because he was a Christian.

So I wasn't impressed when, the other day, I was confronted by his cherubic, afro-haloed face at 40 times its normal size, threatening me with a giant bottle of Pepsi.

Ok, so it's rather irrational to accuse the winner of *Australian Idol* of "selling out"! But it made me realise I'd been expecting something different from Guy than from other production-line popsters.

Now, while Guy was dominating the headlines, down the back of the newspapers France was debating whether Islamic headscarves (and other prominent religious insignia) belonged in state-run schools.

It struck me this dilemma had something in common with my grouse with Guy. Both turned on the relationship between private belief and public image. By proclaiming themselves as Muslims, the French women were acknowledging their obedience to a competing (and implicitly higher) authority than the State's.

Allowing for the selective sieve of the media, the only Christian "proclamation" I've heard Guy making is that he doesn't believe in sex before marriage. This is a powerful statement – to the extent that it is understood as one aspect of a re-ordered personal and inter-personal economy under God's authority. Unfortunately, in isolation it can be too easily written off as a neo-conservative quirk, or worse, as a challenge to some fans.

By appearing to unquestioningly endorse the values of the "Pepsi Generation", Guy is reinforcing the message that there is no conflict between following Jesus in your "personal life" while publicly bowing to the authority of the idols of global consumer-capitalism.

Come on Guy. To paraphrase the founder of Apple Computers when persuading a soft-drink executive to join his company: do you really want to sell sugar water all your life, or do you want to change the world?

Sally Cloke is a writer who works for The Melbourne Anglican and worships at Holy Trinity Port Melbourne. She doesn't own a TV but would really like an afro. You can email her at web@melbourne.anglican.com.au.

