

“Does God Speak Today?” part 2
2 Peter 1:16-21
May 13, 2007
Dr. Jerry Nelson

The sermon today is a corrective to the sermon preached two weeks ago.

Like the Fonz on the old “Happy Days” sitcom, as much as it pains me I must admit that in part I was “wr.. wro.. wr... wro.. wrong!”

Having admitted that I will quickly add however that I was not nearly as wrong as some on the other side of the issue have been.

So maybe we can look at this issue again and come closer to how God would have us think about it and act on it.

Now for you who weren't here two weeks ago or you who were here but have no memory of what we talked about, at the very least I hope I've piqued your interest.

In the message of two weeks ago entitled “Does God Speak Today?” I challenged the ever-more-popular and over-used phrase “God told me...” or variations of it.

I spoke of those who seem to regularly hear from God apart from Scripture and who steer their own lives and sometimes try to steer others by words purportedly from the Lord.

I slammed the door shut as tightly as I could on the idea that people today can speak for God with the authority that the Prophets and Apostles did as they wrote the pages of Scripture.

I wanted to establish that Scriptures alone have the authority of the Word of God.

In our text of two weeks ago and again today, Peter was answering the question of who speaks for God.

2 Peter 1:20-21 “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

But in that sermon, I inadvertently portrayed as possible heretics those who have ever felt that they have been directly led by the Lord to think something or do something.

I readily admit there is a significant difference in what Mormon Joseph Smith meant compared with what some Christians mean when they speak of “hearing from the Lord.”

I also made strong statements about the sufficiency of Scripture for knowing the will of God today.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be **thoroughly** equipped for every good work.”

I do not yield at all on the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture.

But I was wrong in leaving the impression that God cannot or will not guide or speak today except by the Scriptures.

My error flows from a very real concern.

First, we must guard against anything that would begin to add to the Scriptures.

In that, we must guard against any writings that would intentionally claim to be the Word of God on a par with Scripture such as Christian Science’s *Key to the Scriptures* or the *Book of Mormon*.

And secondly, we must also guard against anything that even unintentionally takes on an authority in peoples’ lives that rivals Scripture such as people who feel their every move is guided by direct revelations from God.

They may not call them revelations but they speak as if they have a “control tower to pilot” relationship with God.

So I wanted to shut the door tightly against the abuses that so readily arise when even Christians begin to **depend on** sources other than God’s Word in the Bible to guide their lives.

But for some of you, switching metaphors, I may have thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

So today I want to address two issues.

First I want to talk about those “impressions,” “nudges,” “ideas,” “leadings” or “words” from the Lord that occasionally occur in our lives.

Secondly, I want to talk about how God normally guides us in our lives.

So first, what do we make of those “impressions” or “leadings” from the Lord that seem so clear to us.

- Can such “impressions” on us, or “words” to us, actually be from God?
- And how do we judge the accuracy of such experiences?

Out of a deep reverence for the uniqueness of the Sacred Scriptures it would be easiest to simply assert that God has spoken in his Word, the Bible, and will not do so again until Jesus comes again.

The problem is that those same Sacred Scriptures won’t allow for such a strict interpretation of “revelation.”

Among many such examples in the Scriptures we find this in Acts 21:4-5: “Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit, they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way...”

The author of the book of *Acts* is Luke.

He says they met with disciples; clearly this is a group of Christians.

It further says that those Christians “through the Spirit” urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

The text doesn’t say those disciples **thought** it was the Spirit of God who told them this – it says it **was** the Spirit.

Here apparently the Spirit prompted these disciples to say something.

Whether the disciples got the message exactly right or not is another question but what I want you to

notice is that Paul didn't challenge their experience; he didn't say they couldn't have heard from the Spirit.

But very noteworthy is that he didn't heed their advice; he went on to Jerusalem.

One conclusion I can draw from that is that Paul didn't place that word from the Spirit, interpreted by those disciples, on a par with sacred Scripture.

Let me give you some other examples of revelation from God apart from the sacred text:

In Matthew 16:17 when Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus said, that the father had **revealed** that to him.

In Galatians 1:16 Paul said that God chose to **reveal** Jesus to him on the road to Damascus.

Matthew 11:27 No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to **reveal** him.

In 1 Corinthians 2:10 when speaking of how it was that some became believers while others did not Paul wrote, "but God has **revealed** it to us by his Spirit."

Upon further reflection on those and similar passages, I realized that I couldn't properly narrow my definition of "revelation" to only the inscripturated Word of God.

As NT theologian Don Carson put it, there is something between "objective Scripture (and) uncontrolled mysticism."

(Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 162)

I had to admit that the distinctions between "revelation from God" and what some refer to as "impressions" or "nudges" or a "sense" or even "illumination" from God are distinctions without a real difference.

Either they are from God or they are not and to quibble about the wording is not warranted.

The point is that the Scripture itself speaks of God revealing something to NT believers apart from the Scripture.

So again while it would be easier, in one regard, to say that all revelation from God ceased with the completion of the NT, I don't think the Bible allows that interpretation.

So if such impressions or words or nudges can in fact be from God, how do I judge the accuracy of such experiences?

There are some Christians who are convinced they have heard from God when the godly people around them know that that Christian's experience is as bogus as a three-dollar bill.

How do we keep from being ensnared when, out of a desire to hear from God, we assume we have when we have not?

Here I'm indebted to Dr. J.I. Packer the author of the book *Knowing God* and many other books and known as a deeply spiritual leader in Christ's Church today.

1. "If anyone today receives a direct disclosure from God on any matter at all, it will have no canonical significance: that is, it will not be meant to become part of the church's rule of faith and life, nor will the church as such be under any obligation to acknowledge the disclosure as revelation: nor will anyone merit blame for suspecting that the disclosure was not from God at all." ("True Guidance" by J.I. Packer)

Pat Robertson, Benny Hinn, and a host of others today, as in the past, seem to want us to believe they have heard directly from God on so many matters.

And so many times they are so wrong.

So when we have an experience that makes us think maybe we have received a message from God, we ought to be very reluctant to call it that until it is confirmed in other significant ways.

2. "Guidance in this particular form is not promised: for it to occur is extraordinary, exceptional, and anomalous. No Scripture leads us either to hope for it or to look for it. Any, therefore, who believe that a direct revelation has been given them should not on this account

expect such a thing ever to occur again; and the idea that specially holy persons may expect this sort of guidance often, or that such experiences are a proof of their holiness and of their call and fitness to lead others, should be dismissed out of hand.” (ibid)

It has become in vogue today to speak of conversing with God or hearing from God leaving the impression that a spiritual person has a minute by minute verbal conversation with God akin to what you have with your spouse or your best friend.

I am very troubled with the so-called scriptural basis for these ideas about hearing from God.

3. Most likely then, “any direct communications from God will take the form of impressions, and impressions can come even to the most devoted and prayerful people from murky sources, like wishful thinking, fear, obsessional neurosis, schizophrenia, hormonal imbalance, depression, side effects of medication, and satanic delusion, as well as from God. **So impressions need to be suspected before they are sanctioned, and tested before they are trusted.** Mere confidence that one’s impressions are God-given is no guarantee at all that this is really so, even when, as sometimes happens, they are bound up with noble purposes and they persist and grow stronger through long seasons of prayer. Bible-based wisdom must judge them...” (ibid)

But given those warnings, we still have biblical examples of those who have been led by the Lord apart from a chapter and verse in the Bible.

I mention just two:

- Nehemiah spoke of “what God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.” Nehemiah 2:12
- The Holy Spirit restrained Paul and Silas. They “attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” Acts 16:7

We are not told how, but whether through circumstances or impression or some “word,” they were communicated with by the Spirit of God and kept from going. (ibid)

So how do we test such “impressions?”

First, if they are contrary to Scripture we know they are wrong.

Second, if the impression is not supported by principles of Scripture, they are at best unnecessary and at worst bogus.

In the Bible God has told us what it is that he requires of us and what we are to give our lives to.

It seems that some people have taken this idea of God speaking to them to unbiblical extremes.

They think they are godlier because they live in a perceived constant direct communication with God wherein God tells them what color shoes to wear today, what parking place to take, and whether they should buy this item or another.

Third, if the counsel of other godly people challenges the impression, it is unlikely from God.

It has been told to me that a local pastor, years ago, would get counsel from his leadership team about a certain course of action and then would retire to his study to get a word from the Lord.

Too often his “word from the Lord” was contrary to the counsel of his elders.

Fourth, if spiritual wisdom argues against it, it is not from God.

The impression might be clear but the truthfulness and authority of it must be judged with spiritual wisdom.

Spiritual wisdom is a Scripture-saturated, renewed and renewing mind that is able increasingly to distinguish what is consistent with God’s Word.

What this means is that the Christian is required to stand in judgment of the supposed “word” from the Lord.

Contrary to how we often think, just because it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck doesn’t mean it is a duck.

I’ll speak more to this issue of spiritual wisdom in a minute.

So, does God speak today apart from the very words of Holy Scripture?

The Bible says yes.

But for reasons already shown, such words are never to be placed on a par with Holy Scripture.

Also, as Packer said it, such words or “**impressions need to be suspected before they are sanctioned, and tested before they are trusted.**”

What is clear to me is that when the NT, in reference to the church’s ministry today, uses such words as “prophecies,” “interpretation of tongues,” and “revelation” it means something substantially different from the absolute prophecy and the certain, authoritative Word of God described in 2 Peter 1:21.

So I am cracking open the door to a broader definition of “revelation” than just the written Word of God in the Old and New Testaments.

As I have hopefully shown you, the Bible allows the word to include Spirit-prompted impressions, nudges, feelings, words, etc.

But I have hopefully also laid great emphasis on the necessity of guarding our hearts carefully and our minds rigorously against accepting such impressions as necessarily from God.

I am concerned for Christians today who tend toward DEPENDING ON direct revelation to guide them.

My concern is that it depreciates the Spirit’s role of using the Scripture in their lives – leaving them vulnerable to all sorts of errors and abuses.

But as I said, there is **a second issue** I want to talk about in regard to God’s speaking today.

How does God normally guide us?

Two weeks ago and again today I have spoken of what we should **not** expect but what **should** we expect?

We want to follow Jesus not just in theory but also in practice; how do we know what he wants us to do when so many decisions of life are not given specific answers in the Bible?

My concern for you is real.

I want you to be able to proceed in your following Jesus with confidence that you can please him and that you can know his will for your life.

I want you to be able to act with assurance, moving ahead making decisions that are pleasing to God.

While I want you to know what to do with those unusual promptings that seem to be from God, I don't want you hindered, tentative and fearful, waiting for some kind of guidance that the Scripture does not promise.

As I said earlier, one of my deep concerns is with what is an old idea that has resurfaced in Evangelicalism again today.

It is, I think, an unbiblical and unhealthy emphasis on the mystical implied in such phrases as "hearing God," "listening for the Spirit," "waiting upon God" and the like.

It seems as if the Bible is being regarded by some as lifeless words on a page while the impressions we get from heaven are the fresh living words of God to us.

Understood correctly, the Bible does not allow us to run toward either a dead rationalism or unbridled mysticism.

I will contend along with Hebrews 4:12 that because the Bible is the Word of God, illuminated by the Spirit of God, it "is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

Further, with the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16, I will argue "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..."

I will further contend that impressions from heaven are the unusual not the usual method whereby God directs his children.

Though it is somewhat an argument from silence, the experience of people in the Bible certainly doesn't lead us to expect to receive immediate and direct revelation from God.

Even many of the apparently important decisions of life were made without such direct intervention from God.

Look at the life of any person of the Bible and you will see that God's direct revelations to them were few and far between.

So is God's guidance less personal because it appears less direct?
No, in fact I want to show you how personal it is.

God's guidance of us comes first through Providence.

Last week from Psalm 139 Pastor Dan showed us God's loving, personal, even intimate superintendence of our lives.

Your very life, your country of birth, your parents, your experiences, your natural abilities along with all else is the product of God's loving hand on you from conception.

Westminster Shorter Catechism: "God's providence is his completely holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action."

Do we realize how much God has already steered the course of our lives before we even begin to think about choices?

Could anything be more intimate, personal and loving?

Secondly, God's guidance comes through the Written Word of God.

Just as providence limits the possibilities of our choices so the Word of God sets limits.

Providence is outside of our control while responding to the Bible is a matter of obedience.

Don't tell the Psalmist David or Jesus that the written Word of God is not personal:

- Psalm 119:105 "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."
- Matthew 4:4 "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Some suggest that the Bible doesn't speak to most of the decisions that we must make in life.

But the Scriptures are much more comprehensive than we at first think.

Only as a person studies God's Word for years does he/she begin to realize how far-reaching are its precepts and principles; how much of everyday life it addresses.

I don't have to wonder much about what God's will is in regard to how I treat my family and others or about what is to be most important in my life.

Well, you say, there are still some things the Bible doesn't speak to!

And I say, yes that is true, if what you are expecting from God is information – if you want God to directly tell you whether to take that job or the other or whether you are to marry or not.

But I believe God's guidance is even more personal and powerful than that - God's guidance, thirdly, comes through a renewed mind.

Listen to how the Bible talks about knowing the will of God.

In Colossians 1:9-10, Paul prays that God would "fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,

Here Paul prays for a Spirit-given wisdom to know and do God's will in their lives.

Likewise Paul prays for the Philippians in 1:9-11 "that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. "

"Discern" here is the same word as "test and approve" in Rom 12:2.

Romans 12:1-2 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**. Then you will be able **to test and approve what God’s will is**—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

God doesn’t want us just to make right choices; he wants us to be the kind of person who does so.

One author suggests that 95% of what you do every day you don’t even think about and you probably don’t ask God to show **YOU**. (John Piper, sermon from August 22, 2004)

You just act out of whom you are.

Matthew 12:34-35 “For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”

The kind of dependence that God calls us to is not the immature childish dependence wherein God has to tell us everything to do every day.

The dependence he calls us to is a mature dependence wherein we know that we live and move and have our being in Christ but we grow up in him

God is training us to be mature sons and daughters.

John Piper has written recently, “What is necessary is that we have a renewed mind, that is so shaped and so governed by the revealed will of God in the Bible, that we see and assess all relevant factors with the mind of Christ, and discern what God is calling us to do. This is very different from constantly trying to hear God’s voice saying do this and do that. People who try to lead their lives by hearing voices are not in sync with Romans 12:2. There is a world of difference between praying and laboring for a renewed mind that discerns how to apply God’s Word, on the one hand, and the habit of asking God to give you new revelation of what to do, on the other hand. **Divination does not require transformation**. God’s aim is a new mind, a new way of thinking and judging, not just new information. His aim is that

we be transformed, sanctified, freed by the truth of his revealed Word.” (Piper, *ibid*)

More briefly said, as I put it two weeks ago, “Seek to live by the principles of God’s Word and to God’s glory and do as you please!

Look at one of the most important decisions made in the life of the Church.

The future of the church hung on this decision.

Would Gentiles be allowed to become part of the church without becoming Jewish in their faith?

If ever a decision needed a voice from heaven, a word from the Lord, it was this one.

But listen to the Scripture describe how the decision was made:

Acts 15:28 “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements...”

They had a council, they deliberated, they argued, they prayed, and they arrived at a decision.

They didn’t go into a room and listen for a still small voice.

Again from Dr. Packer, “Informed by biblical theology and narrative, soaked in the biblical text itself, aiming always at the best for God’s cause and others’ good, and confident in God’s promise of guidance to the humble and prayerful (New Testament believers) sought to be made wise, prudent, and judicious, men and women of good judgment. They asked that God would thus enable them to see each time the course of action for which there was most to be said as they reviewed facts, took advice, measured their personal resources, surveyed circumstances, and calculated the consequences of possible choices.” (J.I. Packer “The Ministry of the Spirit in Discerning the Will of God.”)

This is not less spiritual or less personal.

God is involved in every part of what he calls us to.

Ephesians 4:13-15 “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and

there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.”

Does God speak today? Oh, yes he does!

He speaks in the unusual way of direct revelation which must be carefully scrutinized because while the Revealer is infallible, we the receivers are not.

And God speaks in the more usual way of Spirit-led guidance by his written Word.

Most helpful books regarding “prophecy” and other spiritual gifts and words from the Lord today:

D.A. Carson *Showing the Spirit – a Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14*

Wayne Grudem *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*

J.I. Packer *Keep in Step with the Spirit*

Please also see the articles below by J.I. Packer, Gary Gilley, John Piper and Sinclair Ferguson. There are some contrasting views worth considering.

Prophecy and the Canon:

“Thus, when Paul presupposes in 1 Corinthians 14:30 that the gift of prophecy depends on revelation, we are not limited to a form of authoritative revelation that threatens the finality of the canon (Bible).” (Carson, 163)

Certainty about today's experiences:

"The conclusion to be drawn from such observations is that not much can be concluded so far as the authority status of the contemporary phenomenon is concerned." (Carson, 164)

John Calvin on prophecy today:

Prophecies may have been part of the church's experience throughout the centuries (though unusual after the excesses of a group called the Montanists about 100 years after the Apostle Paul)...But John Calvin himself commenting on Ephesians 4:11 where prophets are mentioned wrote, "none such exists now, or they are less manifest." In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 12 he suggests that the prophets are those who are skilled at applying the prophecies of Scripture but adds that he may be wrong because there are still "traces or shades of them still to be found." (Institutes 4.3.4 in Carson, 168)

OT Prophecy and NT Prophecy

It was also unfair to equate the prophecy of the Old Testament with the prophecy of the New Testament. They are not defined or experienced as synonymous. Therefore to claim that any prophecy today that is not 100% accurate is necessarily not from God was unfair. In fact the need to treat current "words for the Lord" with a respectful caution is called for. Even Paul apparently didn't treat the prophecy of his disciples as authoritative in the way the Bible is. Acts 21:4-5 "Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. **Through the Spirit** they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way..." The only alternatives are not "objective Scripture or uncontrolled mysticism." (Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 162)

Revelation's several definitions:

- 1 There is the revelation of God spoken of in 2 Peter 1:20-21 and 2 Timothy 3:16 – the Written Word of God.
- 2 There is also the revelation of God given in creation as explained and limited in Romans 1:20 "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,
- 3 There is certainly the revelation of God given us in the person of Jesus when he was here on earth as described in Hebrews 1:1-3 "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.
- 4 There is the revelation yet to come when Christ returns.
- 5 But beyond those four examples of revelation there are other ways that God has and does communicate his will even today. (see examples in the sermon above).

Wisdom along the Way

By J. I. Packer

http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID560462%7CCIID2025884,00.html

One way in which evangelicals differ from most Roman Catholics and liberals is that they are constantly uptight about guidance. Does any concern command more interest or arouse more anxiety among modern Bible-believers than discovering the will of God for one's life? I do not think so.

It was of evangelicals that Joseph Bayly wrote in 1968: "If there is a serious concern among Christian students today, it is for guidance. Holiness may have been the passion of another generation's Christian young men and women. Or soul winning. Or evangelizing the world...But not today. Today the theme is getting to know the will of God."

Again, it was of evangelicals that Russ Johnston declared in 1971: "I've spoken at many conferences where part of the afternoons are [sic] set aside for workshops...If you make one of the workshops 'Knowing the Will of God,' half the people sign up for it even if there are 20 other choices."

And it was of evangelicals that Carry Friesen reported in 1981: "Interest in the subject of guidance is consistently high...The demand for magazine articles and books on the subject continues unabated. People continue to seek guidance on guidance."

My own experience confirms this: so, I am sure, does yours. I find that the more earnest and sensitive a believer is, the more likely he or she is to be hung up somewhere about guidance. And if I am any judge, the evangelical anxiety level on the subject continues to rise.

Why is this? we ask. The answer does not seem to be far to seek.

The source of anxiety is a desire for guidance linked with uncertainty about how to get it and fear of the consequences of not getting it. Such anxiety has an unhappy way of escalating.

Anxious people get allured by any and every form of certainty that offers itself, no matter how irrational: they become vulnerable to strange influences and do zany things, the sight of which makes the guidance issue more perplexing for the rest of us than it was before. Over the past 150 years there has been a most unhelpful buildup of tension, to a point where it muddles minds, darkens counsel, and obstructs maturity in a way that is Spirit-quenching and scandalous.

If God uses the following paragraphs to relax some of the painful anxieties about guidance that Christians currently feel, I shall be overjoyed. When muscles are hurting, relaxation is the first step towards a cure, and the same is true of guidance worries.

First, then, let it be said that the desire to know God's guidance is a sign of spiritual health. Healthy believers want to please God. Through the great change of heart that we call regeneration they have come to love obedience and to find joy in doing God's will, and the very thought of offending him grieves them deeply. To live in a way that shows gratitude to God for His grace is their purpose, indeed their passion, and as they grow spiritually so this desire becomes stronger. Naturally, therefore, they want as clear indications of the will of God as they can get, so that they may do it.

Reinforcing this desire is the feeling of bewilderment that swamps most modern Westerners at the vast range of choices in every field that our civilization opens to us. A wish for help in decision-making is an understandable reaction. Some would rely for this on gurus, palmists, astrologers, clairvoyants, Ann Landers, and specialist counselors. Healthy Christians, however, while valuing human advice, look to God also. **There are, after all, in Scripture many promises of divine direction, and many testimonies to its reality in the lives of biblical saints, in light of which it would be positively wrong for a Christian not to seek God's help in making choices, commitments, and other decisions.**

But now, second, let it be said that the fear of spiritual ruin through mistaking God's guidance is a sign of unthinking unbelief.

In saying this I have a particular fear in mind, one that I have met

many times in my ministry. Other pastors meet it too: it is very widespread. It does not seem to be the product of any one school of thought, but to be the kind of twisting of truth that our fallen minds, with their legalistic bias and their inclination to view God as an ogre, naturally fall into. Satan, who loves to misrepresent God and make Him seem ugly naturally, sponsors it!

It may be stated as follows: God's plan for your life is like an itinerary drawn up for you as if by a travel agent. As long as you are in the right place at the right time to board each plane or train or bus or boat, all is well. But the moment you miss one of these preplanned connections, the itinerary is ruined. A new one may then be devised, but it can only ever be second-best compared with the original perfect plan.

The assumption is that God lacks either the will or the wisdom or both to get you back on track: therefore a substandard spiritual life is all that is open to you now, and though you may not actually be on the scrap-heap, losing your soul, you are certainly on the shelf, having forfeited much of your usefulness. Your one mistake thus sentences you to live and serve God as a second rate Christian forever.

Many Christians run scared all their lives, fearing such disaster at every point of a major decision, while others trudge along with heavy hearts, believing that this fate is already upon them by reason of some imprudence long ago. In either case, the fruit that fearful fancy bears is bitter.

The kernel of truth in the above scenario is that ordinarily one has to live with the human and material consequences of the decisions one makes, and bad decisions have sad consequences from which we cannot expect to be shielded. But beyond that the fear described expresses nothing more respectable than unbelief regarding the goodness, wisdom, and power of God who so far as our fellowship with Him is concerned can and does restore the years that the locusts have eaten (see Joel 2:25). Scripture shows us a number of saints making great and grievous mistakes about the will of God for them—Jacob fooling his father, Moses murdering the Egyptian, David numbering the people, Peter boycotting Gentile believers, for example—yet none

of them thereby became incurably second-class. On the contrary they were each forgiven and restored, which in fact is how all-true saints live all the time.

Misconceiving God's will is surely less sinful than knowing and not doing it, and if God restored David after his adultery with Bathsheba and his eliminating of Uriah, and Peter after his threefold denial of Christ, we should not doubt that he can and will restore Christians who err only through making honest mistakes about his guidance.

The last phrase paves the way to my third point: the embracing of wrong ideas about God's way of guiding causes many wrong conclusions about the right thing to do.

The basic fault here, from which all the rest spring, is disregard of a principle that is writ large in Scripture—too large, perhaps, for some of us to see. (Yes, I mean that seriously: have you never yourself described something as too obvious to be noticed?) The principle is that the right course is always to choose the wisest means to the noblest end, namely the advancing of God's kingdom and glory. The moral law delimits the area within which the choice must be made (for sin is out of bounds: the end never justifies the means), and God-given wisdom, comparing the short—and long-term effects of alternative courses of action, will lead us within these limits to the best option. That option will always be the greatest good, or in invidious situations, where no course of action or inaction is free from regrettable aspects, the least evil.

In making our choice, one invariable rule is that that which is merely good (“good enough,” as we say) must never become the enemy of the best. It is never enough to ask, as the Pharisees did, whether such and such a course of action is free from taint of sin: **the Christian's question should be, is it the best I can envisage for the glory of God and the good of souls? God enables us to discern this by prayerfully using our minds—thinking how Scripture applies, comparing alternatives, weighing advice, taking account of our heart's desire, estimating what we are capable of. Some might call this common sense, but the Bible calls it wisdom, and sees it as one of God's most precious gifts.**

Is there a personal touch from God in all this? Most certainly.

Those whom God wants in the pastorate, or in cross-cultural missionary work, or some other specialized ministry, are ordinarily made to realize that they will never get job-satisfaction doing anything else. When God has in mind a particular career for a person He ordinarily bestows an interest in that field of expertise. When God plans that two people should marry He ordinarily blends their hearts. But God's inclining of the heart (as distinct from our own self-generated ambitions and longings) are experienced only as meshing in with the judgments of wisdom. Thus, a passion for an unsuitable person as a life partner, or for a ministry beyond one's ability-level, should be seen as a temptation rather than a divine call.

But over the past 150 years a different approach to Christian decision-making has established itself, one which plays down the significance of thought and wisdom in the quest to know God's will. A mode of guidance more direct and immediate than the forming of a wise judgment on the matter in hand has come to be desired. Why is this? The desire seems to reflect a mixture of things.

One is the anti-intellectual, feeling-oriented, short-term mentality of today's secular culture, invading and swamping Christian minds.

Another is an admirable humility: believers do not trust themselves to discern the ideal course of action, and hence long to have it directly revealed to them.

Another is the quite false idea that what God wants his children to do is irrational by ordinary standards, and not therefore something to which wisdom as such would direct us.

Another is the fancy that, since each Christian is a special object of God's love, special instructions from God can be expected whenever he or she has to make a significant decision—a fancy that seems to reflect as much of childish egoism as it does of childlike faith.

Another is the presence in Scripture of guidance stories

involving direct revelation, stories on which latter-day narratives of guidance are verbally modeled, **leaving the impression that guidance is usually given this way.**

Some seek guidance by making their minds blank and receiving what then rises into consciousness as a divine directive. This was a daily devotional routine in Frank Buchman's Oxford Group (afterwards, Moral Re-Armament), and it undoubtedly kept people honest with their own consciences, often to good effect. But murky urges and self-indulgent dreams, as well as pricks from conscience, will surface at such times, and those who assume that whatever "vision" fills the blank is from God have no defense against the invasion of obsessive, grandiose, self-serving imaginations spawned by our own conceit.

Others, like the diviners of ancient paganism and the devotees of modern astrology, **hope to be told facts about the future in the light of which they may chart a knowledgeable course in the present.** This is what guidance means to their minds. But Scripture directs us to live by God's revealed will of precept, rather than by any such prying into His hidden will of purpose as Deuteronomy 29:29 says: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God: but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

Others, again, rather than seeking to work out by wisdom the best and most God-honoring thing to do in a situation of choice, will draw lots, or set up situations in which they ask God for signs (a practice loosely based on Gideon's action recorded in Judges 6:36-40, and therefore sometimes called "fleeing"): or else they will wait for a "prophecy" or dream or vision or a heavenly voice in their inner ear. Sometimes they succeed in inducing the experience they seek, as did covetous Balaam: there are few experiences that cannot be induced if one wants them badly enough. Many have been led in this way to embrace wildcat schemes and immoral follies, believing that God has approved or even instigated what they have found themselves longing so hard to do.

A similar mistake is to find in Scripture private messages from God which in fact are no more than one's own reading into the

text of senses that cannot be read out of it. My long-time friend and teacher Alan Stibbs would tell how, having promised to serve a church in the north of England, and then been invited to an attractive post in South Wales, he read in Isaiah 43:6 the words “I will say to the north, Give up,” and got the idea that here God was promising him providentially to terminate his prior commitment so that he might be free to do what at that moment he felt he most wanted to do. It didn't happen, and when Alan looked again at his text and saw (for the first time, as it seemed) that it goes on—“ . . . and to the south, Do not withhold”—and that it concerns the gathering of God's people from all over, the scales fell from his eyes and he saw how he had been fooling himself with his original fancy.

God is sovereign, and very gracious to those who humbly seek Him. No doubt He has on occasion given guidance by all the way-out means I have mentioned, and no doubt He will again. But such cases are exceptions, and to expect them to be the rule is to ask for trouble. What sort of trouble? Either delusion and misdirected zeal, or apathy and lack of motivation, as one concludes that because no guidance of this immediate sort has reached one recently there is nothing particular that God wants one to be doing just at present. **Which is worse—fanatical activity, or passive idleness? Is it worse to be lunatic or to be lazy?** Make up your mind; I cannot make up mine! Each extreme is very bad. **But a biblical approach to guidance will save us from trouble of both types.**

How may we formulate such an approach? In future articles I hope to go into that thoroughly, but for the moment I offer the following as a summary:

1. Live with the question, what is the best I can do for my God?
2. Note the instructions of Scripture: the summons to love God and others, the limits set and the obligations established by the law, the insistence on energetic action (Eccl. 8:10; I Cor. 15:58), the drilling in wisdom to enable one to make the best choice among behavioral options.
3. Follow the examples of godliness in Scripture: most of all, imitate the love and humility of Jesus Himself. While that is what we are doing, we cannot go far wrong.
4. Let wisdom judge the best course of action: not only the wisdom that God gives you personally, but the corporate wisdom of your

friends and guides in the Christian community. Don't be a spiritual lone ranger: when you think you see God's will, have your perception checked. Draw on the wisdom of those who are wiser than you are: take advice.

5. **Take note of any nudges from God that come your way**—any special concerns for ministry and service, and restlessness of heart which might indicate that something needs to be changed.

6. Cherish the divine peace, which, as Paul says, “garrisons” (guards, keeps safe and steady) the hearts of those who are in God's will.

7. Observe the limits set by circumstances to what is possible, and when it is clear that those limits cannot be changed accept them as from God.

8. Be prepared for God's guidance on a particular issue not to appear until the time comes for decision about it, and for God to guide you one step at a time: for that is how He usually does it.

9. Be prepared to find God directing you to something you thought you would not like, and teaching you to like it!

10. Never forget that if you make a bad decision it is not the end of everything: God forgives and restores. He is your covenant God and Savior: He will not let you go, however badly you may have slipped. “Rejoice not over me, O my enemy: when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.”

That is a word of great comfort for all who seek to live by the guidance of God, and who sometimes find themselves uncertain whether they have grasped it, or afraid that they have missed it. The Lord is my shepherd; He leads me; I need not be uptight! What a relief it is to know that.

Paths of Righteousness

By J. I. Packer

http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID560462%7CCIID2046090,00.html

It is generally felt that guidance is a tricky subject, and most of us have had first-hand experience of what we would call guidance problems, either our own or those of others whom we have tried to help. Why do so many such problems arise? Where do the difficulties come from? Alas, most of them are of our own

making. In our quest for God's guidance we became our own worst enemies, and our mistakes attest to our nuttiness in this area.

What happens? Regularly we go into a twofold tailspin. **On the one hand, we lose theological control, so that erratic superstitions take us over.**

To start with, we isolate and narrow the guidance issues as if it related to major decisions that involve sizable risks for the future, like the choice of a life partner, or a vocational and an employment, or of a place to live and work in one's calling. That isolation is a fruit of bad theology in itself, and opens the door to further mistakes of supposing that guidance regularly comes "out of the blue," as well as say, like an oracle reflecting facts about the future that we ourselves do not and cannot know. Those who look for guidance through a prophecy, inner voice, "fleece," or a random selection of Bible verses are clearly under the spell of this misconception.

Then, **on the other hand, we embrace the romantic fancy that all true guidance experience can be reported in terms of the formula, "the Lord told me" thus and so; in other words, that they are all experiences producing absolute confidence about the rightness of one specific line of action. In the absence of such experience we say that we have not received guidance as yet; if however, after prayer we find ourselves with a pressing urge in our mind, we hail it as "my guidance" and defy anyone to argue us out of it.** Are we right? Probably not, either time. Yet this idea of guidance is so well established in our thinking that a recent book could call it the "traditional" view.

What shall we say of it? **The first thing to say is that this idea of guidance is actually a novelty among orthodox evangelicals, not going back further than the last century** (Of its pre-history among Anabaptists, Quakers, and various sects it would not be much kind to speak). Then, second, it has led good people to so much foolish actions on the one hand, and so much foolish inaction on the other, and so much puzzlement and heartbreak when the "hotline" to God seems to go silent, that it must by now be regarded as somewhat discredited. Third, it has been said that Scripture gives us no more warrant to expect "hotline," "voice-from-the-control-tower" experiences of personal guidance than to expect new authoritative re(ve)lations to come to us for the guidance of the whole church.

Certainly God's guidance is promised to every believed and certainly some individuals in the Scripture stories (Gideon, Manoah and his wife, and Philip, for instance) received guidance in "hotline" fashion—just as some individuals in these stories received revelations of universally authoritative truth, and just as Gideon's "hotline" guidance given by theophany, was later confirmed to him by remarkable things that happened to a sheepskin on two successive nights. **But we must learn to distinguish between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the constant and the occasional, the rule and the exception.** God may reveal Himself and give guidance to His servants any way

He pleases, and it is not for us to set limits to Him. But one question is, whether or not we are entitled to expect “hotline” disclosures on a regular basis. To this question, so I urge, the correct answer is “no.” All the biblical narratives of God’s direct communications with men are on the face of it exceptional, and the biblical model of personal guidance is something quite different.

Scripture presents guidance as a covenantal blessing promised to each of God’s people in the form of instruction on how to live, both in broad policy terms and in making particular decisions. “I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you” (Ps. 32:8). “Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble to what is right and teaches the humble His way” (Ps. 25:8f.). How does God guides? By instructing. How does he instruct. Partly by His shaping of our circumstances, and partly by His gift of wisdom to understand and digest the teaching of His Word and to apply it to ourselves in our circumstances. So God’s regular method of guidance is a combination of providential and instructional action. What more He may do in prompting or redirecting decision in a particular case cannot be anticipated in advance nor made subject of generalization in retrospect. But wisdom will always be given if we are humble and docile enough to receive it.

This is to say that God's guidance is more like the marriage guidance, child guidance, or career guidance that is received from counselors than it is like being “talked down” by the airport controller as one flies blind through the clouds. It is to say that seeking God’s guidance, is not like practicing divination or consulting oracles, astrologers, and clairvoyants for information about the future, but rather is comparable with our everyday thinking through of alternative options in given situations to determine the best course open to us. It is to say that the inward experience of being divinely guided is not ordinarily one of seeing signs or hearing voices, but rather one of being enabled to work out the best thing to do.

The classic Bible presentation of the guided life, and of the reality of the guidance that produces it, is surely **Psalm 23**, that beloved shepherd psalm. Christians should read it as a declaration of it means to be a believer led through life by the God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The picture is of the saint as a divinely shepherded sheep. Silly and apt to stray as I am (“prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love”), my covenant God will not leave me bereft of either security or sustenance. He provides rest (“besides still waters”), refreshment (“he restores my soul”), protection (“through the valley of the shadow of death”), enrichment (“thou prepares! a table”), and enjoyment (“goodness and mercy shall follow . . .”). Guidance is one facet of that total covenant care whereby the King of Love draws me to the destiny of deliverance and delight that He planned out for me before the world was.

Look more closely at verse 3. “Paths of righteousness” are ways of

behaving that are right, and please God, because they correspond to His command and match His moral nature. Vocational decisions that are perceptive and prudent are certainly included, but the basic idea is of being holy as our holy God calls us all to be, and this is where biblical guidance always centers. “For His name’s sake” means: for the furthering of His glory (i.e., responsive praise for revealed praiseworthiness) through his demonstration of covenant faithfulness. The Lord is my shepherd: He is pledged to watch over me, order my travels, stay with me, and bring me safe home, and he will not fail in His commitment. Finally, "He leads me" means that by His instruction within the frame of His providence He gives me wisdom to see the right thing—the best thing, the most fruitful thing, the purest and noblest thing, the most Christ-like and God-honoring thing—that I can do in each situation, and stirs me up to attempt it.

How does God give this discernment? We say it is a matter of wisdom: well, where does this wisdom come from? That question may be answered in two ways. Formally and theologically, the answer is: from God’s Word and Spirit. Personally and experientially, the answer is: from being transformed by God’s grace. Each answer is part of the other: both go together, as follows.

On the one hand, God’s teaching in Scripture is our basic guide for living. Bible history and biography illustrate and enforce, both positively and negatively, the divine demand for faith and faithfulness which so many didactic passages spell out. The Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures both authenticates them to us as the Word of God, making us unable to doubt their authority, and also interprets them to us as we read and meditate on them and hear and read others’ expositions of them. Interpretation means precisely: seeing how they apply. Commentaries can tell us what the text meant as an expression of the writer’s mind to those to whom he first addressed himself, but only the Holy Spirit can show us what it means as God’s Word of direction for our life today. Only through the Spirit is guidance from Scripture a reality.

Here two points that are often overlooked need to be underlined. **First: there are many situations in which the general principles of Scripture are all the guidance we either need or get.** In military operations the general will give the field commander his orders of the day in the form of objectives (capture this strong point, defend that position, move troops to such-and-such a place), and leave it to him to devise the ways and means. **God often guides us in the same fashion, leaving it to us to use the intelligence He gave us in working out the best way to implement biblical principles and priorities. It is part of the process whereby He matures us in Christ.**

GLN adds illustration of a child whom we guide to maturity – not that they are looking to us for every answer but that they have developed a maturity that

knows how to make those decisions for themselves based on the values and principles now “hardwired” into them.

Second: the moral law of Scripture, which is the family code for all God’s children, leaves us free to make our own choices as to how we use created things—what interests we pursue, what hobbies we have, and so forth. No guidance is to be expected in these areas beyond the maxims of not letting the good displace the best, not hurting others by the ways in which we enjoy ourselves and not hurting ourselves by any excessive indulgence that diverts our hearts from heaven to earth and from the Giver to His gifts: in other words, the rules of using liberty responsibly.

On the other hand, inward discernment of the best and holiest thing to do is always a fruit of faith, repentance, consecration, and transformation by the Holy Spirit. Familiar indeed are the opening words of Romans 12: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...” Less often, however is stress, laid on what comes next: “... that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” “Prove” means “discern by examining alternatives,” and **Paul’s point is that there is a moral and spiritual precondition of being able in each situation to see what God wants done.** **Those whose minds God is currently transforming may still err about specific aspects of God’s will in areas of life where their residual unwisdom still holds sway, but where no work of inward renewal is progress no adequate discernment of God’s will is to be expected at all. Guidance is God’s gift to those who are looking to Him—that means precisely, looking to Jesus Christ—to save them from sin. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble His way (Ps. 25:9, emphasis added).**

In this connection we should note the importance of models. The apostles called for imitation of Christ, and also of themselves. What this imitation amounts to is catching the spirit of lowly, costly, self-giving love: love that in its desire to make other persons great spends and is spent up to the limit. Part of the discerning of God’s will to which Spirit-taught minds are led is an awareness of the needs to maintain this attitude in all relationships, and of the evil of the ego trips that negate it.

Here, too, the importance of corporateness in our quest to know the will of God needs stressing. **We were neither made nor redeemed for self-sufficient aloneness, and it is not to be expected that our private stock of wisdom and discernment will suffice without supplement from outside sources.** “In an abundance of counselors there is safety.” We must never be too proud to take advice from persons wiser and godlier than ourselves, and any personal guidance that we think we have received by inner nudge from the Lord ought to

be checked with believers who are capable of recognizing unrealism, delusion, and folly when they see it. In these two ways the Spirit regularly uses the fellowship of the body of Christ to deepen each Christian's discernment of God's will, and it is part of the discipline of divine guidance to be ready for the Spirit to speak to us through other believers to confirm His will for our lives.

Such is divine guidance according to the Scriptures. It may be more than this (we have not yet raised the issue of inner nudges, which the final article in this series will take up); what is certain, however, is that it will never be less than this, and **any supposed guidance that gets away from the Bible, the limits of possibility set by providence, and the discernment of the regenerate heart as to what most honors and best pleases our savior God must be judged phoney and delusive.**

In this age of shallow secularized self-confidence pitfalls here abound, and we need to suspect ourselves and search our hearts time and gain lest we be found fooling ourselves and others by imagining that we have received God's guidance when really our own fancy leads us astray. Yet God remains faithful, and it may still become every Christian's honest and true testimony that "He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake." Praise His holy name!

True Guidance

By J. I. Packer

http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID560462%7CCIID2172936,00.html

In two previous articles I urged that God ordinarily guides His children in their decision-making through Bible-based wisdom. **I dismissed the idea that guidance is essentially an inner voice telling us facts otherwise unknown and prescribing action in light of them, and I criticized the way some Christians wait passively for guidance and "put out a fleece" when perplexed, rather than prayerfully following wisdom's lead.** By now, I am sure, there are mutterings: readers are feeling that I have played down, and thereby dishonored, the guiding ministry of the Holy Spirit. One cannot say what I have said in the steamy Christian atmosphere of 1986 without provoking that reaction. So there is need now to discuss the Holy Spirit's part in guidance in a direct way.

The last thing I want to do is to dishonor, or lead others to dishonor, the Holy Spirit. I hope I shall be believed when I say that. But the fact must be faced that not all notions that seek to honor the Holy Spirit succeed in their purpose. There is such a thing as fanatical delusion,

just as there is such a thing as barren intellectualism, and overheated views of life in the Spirit can be as damaging as “flat-tire” versions of Christianity that understress the Spirit's ministry. That is specially true in relation to guidance.

What does it mean to be “led by the Spirit,” a phrase of the Apostle Paul's, in personal decision-making? That phrase, found in Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18, speaks only of resisting sinful impulses, not decision-making as such: however, the question of what it means to be Spirit-led in choosing courses of action remains a proper and important one. What I have said so far in this series suggests the following answer to it.

The Spirit leads, **first, by giving us understanding of **the biblical guidelines** within which we must keep, **the biblical goals** at which we must aim, and **the biblical models** that we should imitate, plus the bad examples from which we are meant to take warning.**

He leads, **second, by giving us wisdom through **prayerful thought and taking advice** to see how we can best follow this biblical teaching.**

He leads, **third, by making us want God's glory and growth in grace with the result that our vision of spiritual priorities becomes constantly clearer, and our resources of wisdom and experiences for making each next decision when the time comes are constantly increased,**

He leads, **finally, by making us delight in God's will as we discern it, so that we find ourselves wanting to do it because we know that it is the good way for us to walk in.** It is promised that wisdom's paths will be “ways of pleasantness” (Prov. 3:17) and that means, among other things, that if at first we find ourselves disliking what we see to be God's will for us, God will change us at that point if we let Him. God is no sadist, directing us to do what we do not want to do so that He can see us suffer; rather, He has joy in store for us in every course of action to which He leads us, even those from which we shrink at first and which do in fact involve outward unpleasantness.

No one, I hope, would dispute any of this, but some would certainly say that it is only half the story. **Part of what being Spirit-led means, they would tell us, is that one receives instructions from the Spirit through prophecies and inward revelations, as repeatedly happened to godly folk in Bible times (see, for instance, Gen. 22; II Chr. 7:12-22; Jer. 32:19; Acts 8:29, 11:28, 13:4, 21:11; I Cor. 14:30).** They would urge that communications of this kind are a fulfillment of God's promise that "your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it, when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left'" (Is. 30:21) They would link up some at least of these impressions with the Spirit-given "word of knowledge" of which Paul speaks in I Cor. 12:8. **They would insist that this is divine guidance in its highest and purest form, and that Christians should therefore seek it constantly, and that those who play it down thereby show that they have too limited a view of what life in the Spirit really is.**

Here I must come clean. I know that this line of thought is set forth in good faith by good folk, many of them, I am sure, better Christians than I am: yet I think it is simply wrong, and harmful into the bargain, and I shall now argue against it. Yet I choose my ground with care, for it seems to me that **some of the arguments made against this view are as bad and damaging as is the view itself.** Here, as elsewhere, the way of wisdom is like walking a tightrope, from which one can fall through overbalancing either to the left or to the right. **As, in Richard Baxter's sharp-sighted phrase, overdoing is undoing, so overreacting is undermining.** The following paragraph keeps seeking to keep this in mind.

First to clear the ground: the issue here is not whether a person's life in the Spirit is shallow or deep, as if it were certain that the further one advances spiritually the more one will seek and find guidance of the sort described. Nor is the issue whether God has so limited Himself that He will never communicate directly with any present-day Christian as He did from time to time with one another in the Bible story. In my view there is a biblical warrant either for correlating spiritual maturity with dependence on direct divine guidance, or

for denying that God may still indicate His will to His servants in a direct way on specific matters. The real issue here is twofold: what we should we expect from God in the way of direct impressions, and what should we do with any invading impressions that actually come our way.

Take the latter question first. What should Christians do when they find themselves suspecting that God has told them directly to say or do something? Surely they should face up to the follow facts:

1. If anyone today receives a direct disclosure from God on any matter at all, it will have no canonical significance: that is, it will not be meant to become part of the church's rule of faith and life, nor will the church as such be under any obligation to acknowledge the disclosure as revelation: nor will anyone merit blame for suspecting that the disclosure was not from God at all.

If the alleged disclosure is a prediction (as when, for instance, Rees Howells, founder of the Bible College of South Wales, Predicted in the 30s. in his book God Challenges the Dictators, that there would be no second World War), Moses assures us that there is not even a prima facie case for treating it as genuinely from God until it is seen to have come true (Deut. 18:21 f.). If the alleged disclosure is a directive (as when, for instance, a leader claims that God told him to found a hospital or university or mission or crusade of some kind), any who associate themselves with his project should do so because wisdom tells them, that it is needed, realistic, and God honoring, not because the leader tells them that God directly commanded him (and by implication them) to attempt it.

Those who think they have received immediate indications of what God will do, or they should do, will be wise, therefore, to refrain in all situations (worship services, board meetings, gatherings of family or friends, preparation of publications, or whatever) from asking others to agree that a genuine direct revelation has been given them. Right-minded Christians would have to greet such a request with resolute silence, however embarrassing that might be.

2. Guidance in this particular form is not promised: for it to

occur is extraordinary, exceptional, and anomalous. No Scripture leads us either to hope for it or to look for it (Is. 30:21, which at first seems to point this way, is actually promising a supply of wise teaching, not of inward voices speaking apart from what is written). Any, therefore, who believe that a direct revelation has been given them should not on this account expect such a thing ever to occur again; and the idea that specially holy persons may expect this sort of guidance often, or that such experiences are a proof of their holiness and of their call and fitness to lead others, should be dismissed out of hand.

3. Any direct communications from God will take the form of impressions, and impressions can come even to the most devoted and prayerful people from murky sources, like wishful thinking, fear, obsessional neurosis, schizophrenia, hormonal imbalance, depression, side effects of medication, and satanic delusion, as well as from God. So impressions need to be suspected before they are sanctioned, and tested before they are trusted. Mere confidence that one's impressions are God-given is no guarantee at all that this is really so, even when, as sometimes happens when they bound up with noble purposes, they persist and grow stronger through long seasons of prayer. Bible-based wisdom must judge them—which brings us back to where this article began.

Two tragedies of unjudged impressions come to mind as I write this, both involving godly men who were greatly used in spiritual ministry. First, Rees Howells, of whose impression that God would not allow a second World War because it would impede evangelization I have spoken already: later, when the war was on, Rees enforced on the community of his Bible college his impression that God through him was forbidding marriage to all who wished to serve the Lord in the best and most thorough-going way. Predictably, great human havoc resulted from this unscriptural folly. Again some years earlier, the American Frank Sandford had an impression that he with others should cruise the Atlantic in a yacht to intercede for worldwide revival: when a colleague fell sick he had an impression that they should not put in to port for treatment and hence the man died. After the prison term that Sandford's action incurred he had an impression of being called to reproduce the hidden life of Elijah prior to the contest at

Carmel so he did, living entirely incognito save to a handful of friends until his death. These are examples, it seems to me, of unjudged impressions and their sad fruit. To follow impressions, however much they are bound up with the holy concerns of evangelism, intercession, piety, and revival, is not the way to be Spirit-led.

Cases of following unjudged impressions, particularly when they concern sex, money, and power, are, alas, two a penny these days; they make the Lord's enemies blaspheme, and discredit the whole idea of a guided life. It is no wonder if in reaction some conclude that no specific impressions are given by the Holy Spirit at all and that any claim to them must be a delusion. But that is wrong too.

Impressions—not ordinarily revelations of information, but rather focusing of concern—belong to the authentic reality of Christian living. When we say we have a “vision” or “burden” for something, we are testifying to an impression, and when our concern is biblically proper we are right to treat our impression as a nudge from the Holy Spirit.

Nehemiah speaks of what “God put into my heart to do for Jerusalem” (Neh. 2:12), and, as we know, by prayer, persuasion, and push, he got it done. Paul and Silas “attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:7)—that is, an inner impression restrained them. God, as they soon discovered, was leading them to Greece. Paul's “mind could not rest” while evangelizing Troas, because Titus had not come (II Cor. 2:12: “mind” is “spirit” in the Greek, meaning a mind enlightened by God's Spirit). So he left, evidently construing his restlessness as God prompting him to go in search of Titus rather than continue the Troas mission.

These are three biblical examples of saints feeling pulled or pressed by God in particular directions and this is an experience which most Christians, know quite frequently.

My point therefore is not that the Spirit of God gives no direct impressions, but rather that all impressions must be rigorously tested by appeal to biblical wisdom—the corporate wisdom of the community, be it said, as well as any personal wisdom, one has—lest impressions that are rooted in egoism, pride, head-strong unrealism, a fancy that irrationality glorifies God, a sense that some human being is infallible, or any similar unhealthiness

of soul, be allowed to masquerade as Spirit-given. Only impressions verified as biblically appropriate and practically wise should be treated as coming from God. Those who receive impressions about what they should believe and do ought therefore to suspect them, and suspect their own hearts as a possible source of them until this testing has been thoroughly done. -

The radios of my youth would crackle with atmospherics, making reception impossible. All forms of self-centeredness and self-indulgence, from surface-level indiscipline and lawlessness to the subtlety of grandiose elitism or the irreverence of not obeying the guidance you have received already, will act as atmospherics in the heart, making recognition of God's will harder than it should be, and our testing of impressions less thorough and exact. But those who are being "led by the Spirit" into humble holiness (Paul's thought when he used that phrase) will also be "led by the Spirit" in judging their impressions, and so will increasingly be enabled to distinguish the Spirit's own nudges from the posturing of impure and improper desire. "He...teaches the humble His way" (Ps.25:9). Blessed, then, we may say, are the pure in heart; for they shall know the will of God.

The Ministry of the Spirit in Discerning the Will of God

By:

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The Holy Spirit is given to all Christians to transform them by his teaching, making them into God-focused thinkers and equipping them to discern his will and make decisions accordingly. They do this by rational reflection on their life-situation, helped by wise and godly advice, within the parameters that the Word of God establishes. The idea that the superior path in matters of guidance is to wait passively before God for direct promptings to action to come into one's mind is a mistake. So is the superstitious notion that failure to discern the specifics of God's vocational guidance sentences one irrevocably to a second-best life, with no restoration possible.

In the English-speaking Western evangelical world the words "guidance" and "will of God" have become labels for a pastoral problem that has come to loom large in public discussion, because for many believers it has been a source of intense personal anxiety. This problem has the shape of an ellipse with two foci. **Focus one is the question of the**

God-pleasing way to make decisions, particularly about such major matters as whom to marry, where to live, what career to follow, how many children to plan for, what church to join, and so on. There is agreement that God's guidance should be sought in making decisions, but uncertainty as to how one does this. **Focus two is the question of how we should deal with inward impressions, suggestions, promptings and urges that come to us unbidden, sometimes as we try to work our way through problems of decision, sometimes, it seems, as we try to evade them, and sometimes, as we say, out of the blue.** Evangelicals are aware that these impressions might be the voice of God, and also that they might not; so **how may we tell whether promptings we feel are products of our own disordered imagination (wishful thinking or obsessive fear), or Satanic proposal, like the ideas put into Jesus' mind in the wilderness temptation, or monitions from God on which we should act?** On this two-pronged problem of discerning the will of God at least three dozen books¹ have been written at a popular level during the past half-century, and the fact that they have all found buyers shows how widespread concern about this matter has become.

The present essay aims to explore the ministry of God's Holy Spirit in relation to this problem. In light of all that has been written on it already I do not think I shall be found saying anything notably new. But I shall attempt to demonstrate that the problem is regularly discussed in too narrow terms, isolating it from God's total ministry to his Church on earth in a way that is biblically improper, and that makes it both more difficult in itself, and more threatening to sensitive souls, than ever it ought to be. If I can show this, the labor of composition will be well worthwhile.

I open my argument with some general observations on the transforming and enlarging of personal consciousness and individual experience that the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the human heart brings about. This is basic to every mode of spiritual discernment, and every quest for it.

The terrorist demolition of the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001, has led many to speak of it, with good reason, as a day that changed the world. But there was another day that changed the world, in a much deeper and more far-reaching way: that was Pentecost morning in the year 30 or thereabouts, when shortly before nine o'clock Jesus of Nazareth, God's glorified and enthroned Christ and the world's cosmic Lord, poured out the Holy Spirit on his disciples gathered in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-41). For it was then that the new covenant ministry of the divine Spirit was initiated, and that ministry—maybe I should say, the Church in the power of that ministry—has done more to change the world than any other force since history began.

Jesus, as recorded in John's Gospel, had already declared what this new ministry would involve. It would not be the world's first acquaintance with the Spirit of God, who had already (so the Old Testament tells us) been active in creation, providence, revelation, gifting for leadership, and renewing of hearts. But this would be the opening of a new era, all the same, with the Spirit adding a new role to the work he was doing already. Jesus would send the Spirit as "another Paraclete" (Helper, Supporter, Counselor,

Comforter, Encourager, Advocate—paravklhto" [parakletos] has a wider range of meaning than any one English word can cover), to be not just “with” but “in” his disciples for ever (14:16–17). Through his coming Jesus himself, now absent in body, and his Father with him, would come and reveal themselves to disciples in a personal and permanent way, in a communion of love (14:18–23).

As teacher, the Spirit would enable the apostles to recall and grasp what they had heard from Jesus, and would add more to it (14:26; 15:26; 16:13). Thus the apostles would come to see the full truth about Jesus’ glory (16:14) and so be qualified to bear faithful witness to him (15:27).

Then through that witness the Spirit would convince people everywhere of the Christian facts (16:8–11; 17:20) and bring them through new birth to the living faith in Christ that marks entry here and now into God’s kingdom (3:1–15). Hereby the Spirit would engender in life after life the joy and influence that Jesus pictured as “living water” in flow out of the believer as a temple of God (7:37–39, cf. 4:10–14; Ezek 47:1–5).

In this is foreshadowed all of Paul’s presentation of the Spirit’s ministry to individuals (illumination, incorporation into Christ, certification, jubilation, moral transformation, final glorification: see 2 Cor 3:14–4:6, cf. 1 Cor 2:9–15; 1 Cor 12:13, cf. Rom 8:9–13; Rom 8:14–17, cf. Gal 4:4–6; Eph 1:13–14; Rom 14:17, cf. 15:13; Gal 5:22–25; 2 Cor 3:18). And what is said here also anticipates both Paul’s further teaching about the Spirit’s ministry to the Church (incorporating and indwelling, gifting and up building: see 1 Cor 3:16; 12:6–31; Eph 2:19–22; 4:4–16), and Luke’s fascinating and fascinated narrative in Acts of the Spirit’s initiating and empowering activities in the Church’s first generation.

The New Testament view, first to last, is that since Pentecost the Holy Spirit, as the executive of the Trinity and Jesus’ personal agent, has been constantly at work forming the new human family, which is the Church, by re-making sinners in and through Christ in the manner described. Ministry of the gospel is new covenant ministry, and new covenant ministry communicates the life-giving Spirit to this effect (2 Cor 3:6).

Now all that has been said above has experiential implications that revolutionize the workings of our minds. Paul signals this when he writes:

[Christ] died for all so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised. So then from now on we acknowledge no one from an outward human point of view. Even though we have known Christ from such a human point of view, now we do not know him in that way any longer. So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has

passed away—look, what is new has come! (2 Cor 5:15–17)

We hear much today of altered states of consciousness induced by new age techniques of meditation; **it would be well if more attention were paid to the altered state of mind into which new creation by the Spirit brings believers. This new consciousness begins as a permanent pervasive awareness of the inescapable reality, heart-searching presence, and saving love of our holy sovereign God, with a sense that we ought to pray to him, live to him, and seek to please him in all that we do, and at every turn of the road. Then, within this basic framework, Paul speaks directly of “the renewal of your mind.” He does this in a truly foundational statement about discerning the will of God. That statement runs as follows.**

Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

“The mercies of God,” in this passage, are the blessings to previously lost sinners that Rom 1–11 has been spelling out. “Bodies” are the readers’ whole selves. “Holy” means dedicated by man and accepted by God. “Spiritual worship” (so rsv, esv; net, kjv, etc. have “reasonable service” here) is the life of God-glorifying homage that we owe to our divine Rescuer, history’s mighty Lord, the God of the doxology of Rom 11:33–36. “Conformed to” means shaped by, and “this present world” means the existing order of things (culture, heritage, conventions, assumptions, expectations). **“Transformed,” the verb from which comes our word “metamorphosis,” means changed in both outward style and inward character;** it is the verb Paul used in 2 Cor 3:18, where the KJV’s “changed form glory to glory” renders exactly what he wrote. “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within,” was J. B. Phillips’ luminous rendering of what verse 2 is saying. **“Mind” (nou”, nous) here signifies all that the Bible means by “heart”:** namely, the dynamic core of our personhood out of which flow the desires, instincts, tastes, loves, and fears that determine our goals, purposes, mindsets, plans, attitudes, aversions, schemes, excitements, boredoms, and so forth. This is mind, not just as a power of reasoning, but as an index of character. **“Test and approve” precisely translates a Greek verb for which English has no one-word equivalent. The “will of God” is what will please him for each person to do in each situation (that is the thought that the words “good” and “well pleasing” and “perfect” are underlining). We are to discern God’s will for our actions by *testing* (that is, thinking through and comparing) the options and alternatives that are open to us. What Paul sees, and tells us, is that only those whose minds have been re-made by the Holy Spirit thorough one-time regeneration leading to ongoing sanctification will be able to make this discernment adequately. The verbs in verse 2 are in the present tense,**

signifying continuous or repeated action: the renewal of our mind is to be a continuous process, and the discerning of God's will is a task to be repeated whenever fresh choices need to be made.

But without this renewal, no matter how much thinking we do, and however correct our theological formulations, personal discernment of the will of God will not take place. For the will of God covers not only what we do outwardly as performers, but also how and why we do it from the standpoint of our motives and purposes. If these inner aspects of action are not as they should be we fall short of the *perfect* (that is, in the Greek, the fully-fashioned and complete) *will of God*, as did the Pharisees in Jesus' day. Those who are not yet new-created in Christ and indwelt by his Spirit can neither conceive nor achieve the attitudinal rightness (love to God and neighbor: Matt 22:34–40) and the motivational rightness (the “glory,” that is, the display and praise of God: 1 Cor 10:31) that make behavior acceptable in God's sight. This is because, to cite **Phillips'** paraphrase again,

the unspiritual man simply cannot accept the matters which the Spirit deals with—they don't make sense to him, for, after all, you must be spiritual to see spiritual things. The spiritual man, on the other hand, has an insight into the meaning of everything, though his insight may baffle the man of the world...we who are spiritual have the very thoughts of Christ! (1 Cor 2:14–16).

“Thoughts” there is *mind* in the Greek, the same word as in Rom 12:2, meaning **thoughts shaped and driven by desires of the heart.** When in regeneration the Holy Spirit unites us to the risen Christ, our hearts are remade in the image of his, so that we too, like him in the divine-human unity of his personhood, constantly desire to love and obey and please and honor and exalt and glorify the Father. Accordingly, in our Christian lives we will be dominated and driven (and if we misbehave, accused) by this overmastering, ineradicable desire that the Spirit has planted within us. And our thoughts, like Jesus' own, will embody and express this purpose, and enlist all our creativity and power of imagination and relational capacities in its service. So to live is now our nature. **Our blind eyes have been opened, our deaf ears unstopped, and we have tasted the good word of God; our hard hearts have been softened, and our hostility to God's law (that is, his across-the-board instruction on how to please him) has been turned into a love of it. We are conscious of being people who now know God and are known by him in a life-giving relationship. We are new and different creatures, responding to God and reacting to people and things in a new way that was not part of our lives before. In a word, our experience has been changed.** And it is out of this decisive experiential transformation, through the present help of the indwelling Holy Spirit, that discernment of the will of God in each specific case is born.

The Holy Spirit and the Path of Discernment

The gnawing evangelical anxieties about guidance that the three-dozen books mentioned above are addressing did not enter into **the practice of discernment for decision-making among evangelicals of the older school. Informed by biblical theology and narrative, soaked in the biblical text itself, aiming always at the best for God's cause and others' good, and confident in God's promise of guidance to the humble and prayerful (see Pss 5:8; 23:2–3; 25:8–9; 32:8–9; Jas 1:6), they sought to be made wise, prudent, and judicious, men and women of good judgment. They asked that God would thus enable them to see each time the course of action for which there was most to be said as they reviewed facts, took advice, measured their personal resources, surveyed circumstances, and calculated the consequences of possible choices.**

Bruce Waltke models this older practice when he writes:

When I wonder about which job offer to take, I don't go through a divination process to discover the hidden message of God. Instead I examine how God has called me to live my life; what my motives are; what He has given me a heart for; where I am in my walk with Christ; and what God is saying to me through His word and His people.²

There are in this, to be sure, pitfalls, all the direct result of being the sin-spoiled creatures that we are, immature, prejudiced, out-of-shape, and as yet imperfectly sanctified. We need to be aware of how choices may go wrong.

Our understanding of scripture can be incomplete and twisted, particularly when we live in anti-theological and pagan cultures and belong to churches that, for whatever reason, do not preach and teach the entire Bible.

What we think of as our godly desires, which may indeed have their roots in the prompting of the Holy Spirit, can nonetheless be self-centered, self-serving, and self-indulgent to a far greater extent than in our naïve self-ignorance we suspect. Zeal for God, however intense, is no substitute for self-knowledge, and lack of self-knowledge can lead into fanatical craziness.

Our ability to measure our own gifts and potential constantly proves deficient, the more so the younger and more inexperienced we are. Either we undervalue what we can do, feeling that something is beyond us when in fact we could handle it well, or we overvalue our powers, assuming (for example) that because we can talk steadily for long periods we must have a teaching or preaching gift. (Let it clearly be said: no one has a teaching gift unless people actually learn something from him, nor has anyone a preaching gift unless people actually meet God under his ministry.) And it is regularly beyond the power of consciously gifted people to tell whether they have the character qualities needed to sustain their gifts in useful exercise.

Awareness of the reality of these pitfalls burns into the mind the need to distrust emotionally-charged impressions and to take advice from those we recognize as wise, tough-minded, and godly, and most importantly from persons who know us well. The Holy Spirit regularly guides us in discernment for decision-making via the judgments of others.

A case study of decision-making in the life of a great evangelical of the old school, the Englishman John Charles Ryle (1816–1900), expository preacher and writer, evangelical leader, and first bishop of the diocese of Liverpool, will bring some of this into focus.³

Ryle's father's bank suddenly went bankrupt in 1841, when Ryle was 25, headed for public life, and a converted Christian of four years' standing. Reared in the lap of luxury, he now found himself virtually penniless. He sought ordination, not because he wanted to be a clergyman (he didn't) or felt an inner constraint to become one (he felt none), but because it was the only profession open to him that would give him an immediate salary. The evangelical bishop who was willing to ordain him saw his Oxford degree and lively Christian experience as adequately qualifying him for the clergyman's role. (This, then, was a decision based on Ryle's circumstances and a bishop's judgment of his fitness.) Having won his spurs as a minister in two brief underpaid posts, Ryle accepted an invitation to a rural pastorate with a stipend sufficient for a married man, and there wooed the first, followed after her death by the second, of his three wives. His guiding light here was to choose as a spouse someone he could thoroughly respect: "*the great thing I always desired to find was a woman who was a real Christian, who was a real lady, and who was not a fool.*"⁴ His actual discernment, as he applied this principle of wisdom, did not fail him, but the bad health of both his first and second wives drained his resources, and fifteen years after his first marriage he found himself a widower with five children, and a poor man once more. (Good decisions do not always bring the good consequences that we hope for.) A move to a larger, better paying parish and a third marriage led to nineteen years of happy and fruitful ministry there. This however was eventually interrupted, early in 1880, by the invitation to become dean of the cathedral at Salisbury, presumably as a light and honorific job for his old age (he was almost 64), and so a new decision had to be made.

He did not want to go.

Flesh and blood were utterly against it [he wrote to a friend]. But *almost* every one of 16 men I consulted said, "You ought certainly to go for the sake of Christ's cause in the Ch(urch) of E(ngland)."—So who was I that I could withstand? I had prayed for light and signs of God's will, and this was all I got. If three men had said, "Refuse," I would have refused...But...I am a soldier. The Captain of my salvation seems to say, "These are your marching orders." I have nothing to do but to *obey*. Pray for me. My heart is very heavy.⁵ So, discerning from advice received what he ought to do, though against his own desire, he told his people he was leaving them, and got ready to move. But then, within weeks, out of the blue, and requiring immediate decision for political reasons, came the call to Liverpool. To that call Ryle, having already adjusted to leaving the place he liked most, was able to say a responsible "yes" on the spot—actually, on the platform where he had just dismounted from the train and been confronted for the first time with the offer. (This appears as two-stage circumstantial guidance: had God not first led Ryle to commit himself to leave his comfortable pastorate, he would have been in no position to utter that instant "yes." But as it was, he needed only a split-second comparing the depressing prospect of Salisbury with this new challenge, and his mind was made up.) Ryle thus, it would seem, concluded himself called by God to be Liverpool's first bishop. And over a period of twenty years, despite his age, he proved himself to be the man for the job,

giving the diocese an infrastructure and personnel that made it the most evangelical in doctrine, and evangelistic in practice, anywhere in the Church of England.

Was Ryle led by the Holy Spirit in his discernments of the will of God? Surely he was. Were these discernments the product of inner voices or impressions, freak coincidences, private revelations, or any such thing? **No; they were the rational fruit of having a biblical value-system and a heart for God, for his gospel and for his glory; and of seeking wisdom, noting circumstances, taking advice, and not letting the merely good elbow out the best.** By these means the Holy Spirit gave Ryle discernment for his decisions, and we should expect that he will use the same means with the rest of us.

This is the moment for pointing out that God in the Old Testament, and Christ specifically in the New, are set forth as *shepherding* the holy flock and each individual within it (see Pss 23; 77:20; 78:52; 80:1; John 10:11–16, 25–30; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 5:4). Shepherding means caring for, watching over, protecting and preserving, guarding and guiding the sheep as they feed and travel to their many places of pasture. Giving us discernment of his will is only part of the Shepherd's work ordering our lives as he leads us home to glory. **The Father, the Son, and the Spirit shape our circumstances, overrule our advisers, and sustain our overall sense of spiritual realities and theological truths, as well as prompting the brainwork that processes the factors that yield the discernments needed for decisions.** *The idea that at some point in the decision-making we are left to fend for ourselves is a mistake, and a troublesome one, as we shall shortly see.*

The Holy Spirit and Defects in Discernment

How is it then that in this matter of discerning the will of God errors get made? Well, how in God's world do human mistakes ever get made? Here we face, as so often, the mystery of created freedom in a world governed by its sovereign Maker and Master. This is a *both...and*, a state of things in which two seeming incompatibles coexist and it is beyond us to know how what is the case can be. It is a situation best labeled, in echo of Kant, an *antinomy*. The fact that we can and do err and sin does not overthrow God's controlling lordship, any more than that controlling lordship turns us into robots, destroying our self-determining individuality so that we are no longer moral agents answerable to God. This is how things are. So in every part of life intellectual and behavioral lapses actually occur; and we must not be surprised to meet them.

We now examine two common mistakes relating to our Spirit-given discernment of the will of God: the first, about man's passivity, and the second, about God's plan.

(1) The error about man's passivity.

In the movement led by the magnetic Frank Buchman through the middle decades of the last century, which at various times was called Buchmanism, First Century Christian Fellowship, the Oxford Group, and Moral Re-Armament, it was the rule to have a daily “quiet time” in which one practiced what is nowadays called listening prayer. That is, one reviewed one’s ongoing life before one’s divine Watcher and noted what practical ideas about things to do and not to do, people to deal with, tasks to tackle and so forth, broke surface in one’s mind. These thoughts, writes Garth Lean, “became known, in the verbal shorthand of Buchman and his friends, as ‘guidance,’ though neither he nor they considered that all such thoughts came from God.”⁶ To avoid potentially vicious self-deception, these thoughts were always to be tested by whether they embodied absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love, whether they squared with the Church’s teaching and experience and the mind of others seeking guidance this same way, and whether they were actually practicable. So far, so good; none of this is off center. **But in the world of simplistic and somewhat loosey-goosey pietism where this practice was developed the thought-processes comparing alternatives that discernment ordinarily requires were not stressed. Expectations of immediacy in guidance became unhealthily high, while the mental passivity that was cultivated—the fallowness of the mind, as we might call it—led inevitably to an increasingly narrow and undoctinal mindset, the outcome of which was Moral Re-Armament’s drift into multifaith moralism to further its political agenda.** This was not a fruitful way to go. Small wonder that Buchmanism is now a thing of the past.

But **the legacy of this once influential movement seems to be fourfold:**

First, it has given the word “guidance” universal label status among evangelicals for all that is involved in discerning the will of God. This continues.

Second, it has reinforced already widespread expectations of being admonished for action by a direct “word from the Lord,” either through what Pentecostals describe as prophecy, or through a contrived sign (“putting out a fleece”), or through some striking factual coincidence or new notion springing from words of scripture, or through some private inner revelation by dream, voice, or intrusive thought. This also continues.

Third, it has encouraged a murky pride, elitism, and sense of superiority among those who have thought they were receiving, or had received, divine guidance in the supra-rational way that has just been outlined. This still appears.

Fourth, it has generated, and continues to generate, anxiety, depression, and paralysis of action in some who have sought guidance this way without receiving it, and now are either marking time as still they wait for it, or are blaming themselves for not seeking it seriously enough and viewing themselves as relegated to the ranks of second-class Christians—a form of anxiety and inner bleakness that links up with a further condition at which we shall look in a moment.

In saying this, and calling for appropriate brainwork to discern God’s will, I do not mean to imply that only persons of high intelligence, trained minds, and academic excellence can hope to discern the will of God. **Paul prays that God would fill the Colossians with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may live worthily of the Lord and please him in all respects: bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God (Col 1:9-10).**

“Spiritual,” the qualifier of wisdom and understanding, means precisely “given by the Holy Spirit,” and the Spirit is no respecter of persons when it comes to education or brainpower. In similar vein, Paul prays that the Philippians’ love may abound even more and more in knowledge and every kind of insight **so that you can decide** what is best, and thus be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God (Phil 1:9-11).

“Decide” here is the same word as “test and approve” in Rom 12:2. All Christians have minds, and they are not to be left lying fallow; all are to put the minds they have to work in the discernment process.

The nature of the brainwork involved is clear from James Petty’s analysis of the Spirit’s role in divine guidance.

1. The Spirit illuminates the connection between God’s word and our lives.
 2. He does this by personalizing and particularizing (applying) the will of God for us...
 3. The result of the Spirit’s work is not so much a “message from God” as it is a provision of “discernment and wisdom” granted for specific situations and progressively built into Christians as a character trait.
 4. Though it is wisdom from God, it also becomes our wisdom... From God’s perspective it is a direct gift, supernaturally given by the Spirit. From our perspective, it is our renewed mind enabled by God to see as Christ sees. It is our wisdom, yet it is God’s. It is Christ’s mind, yet it is given to us as ours. Scripture sees it both ways and so should we.⁷
- Christians may not make rules for God. It is clear that on occasion God has bypassed reason, giving discernment of his will in a direct and immediate way, just as has been claimed, and it is not for us to deny that he may do so again. But God makes rules for Christians, and it is equally clear that we have no business expecting to discern his will save by Spirit-led reasoning in the manner described. The exception should not be mistaken for the rule.** “Let your mind alone” (the title of one of James Thurber’s extravaganzas) is not the way of wisdom for discerning God’s will. Passivity of mind, valued and cherished, will keep us from spiritual discernment rather than lead us to it.

(2) The error about God’s plan.⁸

That God has a comprehensive, foreordained purpose and plan for all of world history, from the greatest events to the smallest, and that this includes a specific, detailed intention for the life of every human being, is to my mind beyond doubt: the Bible is clear on it.

That his intention, once you become a Christian, is comparable to an itinerary drawn up for you by a travel agent, where everything depends on you being in the right place at the right time to board the plane or train or bus or boat or whatever and where the itinerary is ruined once you miss one of the preplanned connections, is, by contrast, a sad misconception. It is, however, a common view, and has bitter implications. If, on this view, your discernment fails and you get your guidance wrong on some key matter, a substandard, second-best spiritual life is all that is open to you. Though not perhaps on the scrap heap, you are certainly on the shelf, having lost forever

much of your usefulness to God. Your mistake sentences you to live and serve your Lord as a second-rate Christian.

What is wrong with this idea? Three things, at least.

First, it is a speculation—in plain English, a guess, a fancy, indeed a fantasy, and a morbid one at that. There is nothing in scripture to support it.

Second, it assumes that God lacks the wisdom or the will or the goodness or the power to put us back on track when we have slipped. But this is false, and to think otherwise is unbelief. The grain of truth in this view is that bad choices have bad consequences, from which we cannot expect to be totally shielded and with which, therefore, we may now have to live, as Jacob had to live with the limp he got fighting God at Jabbok and David had to live with the family troubles he brought on himself by his marital roving. But the idea that God cannot or will not forgive and restore when transgressors and wanderers confess their follies and repent of them, flies in the face of scripture. Ponder the implications of Solomon's prayer in 1 Kgs 8:27–53, and 2 Chr 6:18–40, and the testimonies in Pss 32 and 85:1–3, the promise in 1 John 1:9, if you doubt that.

Third, this idea ignores clear lessons from Bible biography. Scripture shows us servants of God making great and grievous mistakes in seeking to discern God's will for their actions—Jacob begging his brother and fooling his father; Moses killing the Egyptian; David numbering the people; Peter boycotting Gentile Christians at the meal table, for instance—yet none was thereafter demoted to second-class status. And if God restored David after his adultery with Bathsheba and taking out of Uriah, and Peter after his threefold denial of Christ, we should not doubt his readiness to restore Christians who acknowledge that they failed badly in their endeavor, or perhaps by their reluctance, to discern the will of God.

The source of this mistake about God's plan appears to be a streak of legalism, linked it seems with classic dispensational theology, that found its way into evangelical teaching on the Christian life at the turn of the nineteenth century when dispensationalism was riding high and the older evangelical theology was at a discount. This was the era in which life-occupations were graded on a strict scale of value and desirability (first and best, overseas missionary; second, ordained pastor; third, physician and nurse; fourth, schoolteacher; fifth, money-maker to support evangelical enterprises, and so on), and holiness teachers proclaimed a double standard, urging that it was better, though not necessary, to choose to be a spiritual Christian rather than remain a carnal one. And much was made of Paul's warning that the "wood, hay, stubble" of the careless Christian's life would be incinerated in a "judgment of works"—"If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (1 Cor 3:15). Most of this legalism is now defunct, and it is to be hoped that the frightening and really blasphemous mistake about the plan of God that we have been looking at will perish with it.

Last Word

Finally, it needs to be said that the ultimate purpose of God for every Christian is character-transformation and growth into the full image of Jesus Christ; and therefore that the Holy Spirit's work of imparting wisdom for the discerning of

God's will, case by case, is part of that larger enterprise for which our sanctification is the usual name.

What God wants for us is not simply a flow of correct discernments in the choices we make, but that we become discerning persons in ourselves, as Christ was a discerning person before us. "Wisdom in the Old Testament" writes Bruce Waltke, and in the New Testament this is equally the case, "is a character trait, not simply thinking soberly. People with wisdom have the character whereby they can make good decisions."² But the people with wisdom are those in whom the word of Christ dwells richly (see Col 3:16), and these are the people who heed the summons: "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him" (Col 2:6-7). He is the wisdom of God, the Lord of glory, the good shepherd, and his people's life and hope. So studying the Spirit's works in our discerning of God's will should bring us to the place where with Charles Wesley we sing:

Captain of Israel's host, and Guide
Of all who seek the land above,
Beneath thy shadow we abide,
The cloud of thy protecting love;
Our strength, thy grace; our rule, thy word;
Our end, the glory of the Lord.
By thine unerring Spirit led,
We shall not in the desert stray,
We shall not full direction need,
Nor miss our providential way;
As far from danger as from fear,
While love, almighty love, is near.

Let Wesley's lyric be the bottom line, and the last word, and the constant song of all our hearts.

¹ . "There are about thirty-five evangelical books in print on this subject (this one makes thirty-six)" (James C. Petty, *Step by Step* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999], 9). Among the more useful of these are Petty's own book; Oliver R. Barclay, *Guidance* (London: IVP, 1956); Elisabeth Eliot, *A Slow and Certain Light* (Waco: Word, 1973); Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Portland OR: Multnomah, 1980); M. Blaine Smith, *Knowing God's Will* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981); Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God* (Gresham OR: Vision House, 1995); Phillip D. Jensen and Tony Payne, *The Last Word on Guidance* (Homebush West NSW: Anzea [St. Matthias Press], 1991); Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999 [originally, *In Search of Guidance* (Ventura CA: Regal, 1984)]).

² . Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 35.

³ . For a fuller treatment, see J. I. Packer, *Faithfulness and Holiness: the Witness of J. C. Ryle* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002) 21-26 and 51-52.

⁴ . Ibid.

⁵ . Ibid., 251.

6 . Garth Lean, *On the Tail of a Comet: The Life of Frank Buchman* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988) 75-76.

7 . Petty, *Step by Step*, 165.

8 . I echo here some things in my chapter, "Guidance," in *God's Plans for You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001) 91.

9 . Waltke, *Finding the Will of God*, 360.

Discovering God's Will

Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

<http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/godswill.html>

Walking in the will of God produces a distinctive life-style. There will be certain characteristics, which will be true of all Christians in all places and in every age. There are abiding qualities about true Christians, which would make them recognizable by their fellow believers in very different epochs of church history.

But for every Christian the question arises, not, what is true of all Christians always? But, *What is the will of God in this particular, unique situation in which I find myself?* We have to face the issue of the nature of the principles, which govern Christian conduct. How do we discover the will of God when we are faced with a possibly bewildering array of choices?

The exposition of the Christian walk is a major theme in one of Paul's letters and this further question is also a theme with which Paul dealt at some length. We find him discussing it in his First Letter to the Corinthians. . .

Paul's principles remain valid. Not only so; they are of great practical usefulness to us in discerning what the will of the Lord is in our lives. A careful study of them gives rise to a series of questions, which will help to unfold what God's guidance might be in any given situation.

1. Is it Lawful?

The Corinthians emphasized the (biblical) principle that Christ has set them free. Paul retorted that *freedom is not the only principle in the Christian life*. Freedom is for something. God has set us free for holiness. He has blessed us with freedom from the guilt and bondage of sin - but not in order that we might become enslaved to the very sins for which Christ died to redeem us!

The apostle reinforces this in a powerful way. [in 1 Cor 6:9-11]. Paul provides a long list of the kinds of sinful conduct, which are contrary to membership of the kingdom of God. He does not mean that these heinous sins are the unforgivable sin. Some of the Corinthians had indulged in these very sins before they were converted. Yet they had

been washed, sanctified and justified through Christ! But they had to be radically converted in order to be fitted for the kingdom of God. No anarchy is present there - it is a kingdom, a monarchy, and is governed by the great and holy commandments of God.

What is Paul's point? It is that *no action which is contrary to the plain word of God can ever be legitimate for the Christian*. No appeal to spiritual freedom or to providential circumstances can ever make what is ethically wrong anything else but sinful. For the Christian is free only to love and obey the law of God. Therein lies his true freedom.

We can often reduce the possible choices that face us at different times in our lives by this very simple question: *Is it lawful?* How readily Satan seems to be able to blind us just here - and we lose sight of the fact that we have been saved in order to be made holy.

2. Is it Beneficial to Me?

If our first question is concerned with the nature of the action itself, our second one must be concerned with its consequences. It may be true (in a sense) says Paul, that "all things are permissible" [cf. 1 Tim 4:4; Rom 14:14, etc.]. "But not everything is beneficial" [1 Cor 6:12].

Do you every find yourself challenged on a course of action by a fellow-Christian, and automatically respond: "What's wrong with it?" It is the most natural form of self-defense. But it may well hide a guilty conscience. For, in our hearts of hearts we know, as Paul so incisively teaches, that this is not the really important question. There may be "nothing wrong with it"; but there may be nothing right with it; it may not prove to be beneficial to me.

The question I must learn to ask is: Will it bring benefits, as far as I am able to judge, so that my relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ is strengthened? Will it draw me nearer to Him?

There are so many areas in which this applies. When I am faced with a choice of occupation, or a sphere of work, or a move to another part of the country, with all that it involves in terms of fellowship, ministry and spiritual influence, I am surely obliged to ask this question. Of course it is not the all-determining factor in each instance. But it is an important factor in many cases.

I may find myself with the opportunity to spend a sum of money on something on which I have set my heart. But is it God's will? Well, let the question be introduced into my thinking: Will it benefit? Or, will it have the tendency to consume my time, energy and interests in such a way that I will be spiritually the poorer? Will it complicate, rather than simplify my life?

Of course, no two people will give exactly the same answer in every situation. We are no longer speaking about whether a course of action is lawful for the Christian. we are considering only actions which are. But something which has a neutral influence on one person may be detrimental to another. We are not called to judge other men's consciences [1 Cor 2:15; 4:3-5]. But "the spiritual man makes judgments about all things", and this is what we are enabled to do when we ask: "Is it beneficial to me?" It

may or may not be in others' experience. That is not my concern. I am responsible to Christ for my own stewardship. Is this beneficial to me?

3. Is it Enslaving?

"Everything is permissible to me": - but I will not be mastered by anything [1 Cor 6:12]. There is a play on words in what Paul says: These things are all within my power - but will I end up in their power? Again, assuming that what is being considered falls into the category of things legitimate, this question can only ultimately be answered in personal terms.]

What is the principle? It is that the Christian must always, through the grace of the Spirit, be master of himself. Paul illustrates this later in 1 Corinthians. In the race all who compete have already gone into strict training. They have sought to master and subdue all their natural appetites so that, instead of being mastered by them, they will master their bodies and make them their slaves [1 Cor 9:27].

What happens to the athlete who nibbles at cream cakes and tucks away too many calories? A moment comes in the race when he ceases to be the master, and the appetites to which he has yielded strangle every last ounce of energy out of him. They have him at their mercy and all hope of winning a prize must be abandoned. Is there not a clear parallel in the Christian life? It is possible to make choices which, eventually, will tend to squeeze out our spiritual energies; to commit ourselves to things which, however legitimate in general terms, will eventually become the dominating and driving force in our lives.

Of course we have our spiritual liberties. But **when we find ourselves unable to enjoy the Christian life without our liberties, then we have become enslaved to the,** There is, for example, presumably no built-in evil about owning a new car, or living in pleasant house, or enjoying various foods, spending time in various pursuits, or with certain kinds of people. But when we cannot be content without them; when we simply must have them - they are no longer our liberties, but our chains. The Christian should develop in Christ a sensitivity to those things to which he will most readily allow himself to be brought into bondage. "Will this enslave me?" will be a question never far from his thinking. "I will not be mastered by anything" is a good motto text for the man who has received a spirit of self-discipline [2 Tim 1:7].

4. Is it Consistent with Christ's Lordship?

Sin of tragic proportions had erupted in the congregation at Corinth. Consequently Paul asks whether they rightly understood their relationship *to the Lord*. The only chapter in which he does not use this title for Jesus is chapter 13! It deeply troubled him that the Corinthians failed to realize that they were not their own; they had been bought at the great price of their Master's life blood [1 Cor 6:19,20; 7:23].

What is Paul's concern? It is that whenever a Christian engages in a course of action he does so in union with Christ. *Nothing* severs that relationship. Not even sin can annul it. That is the horrific truth. Whenever the Corinthians gave themselves to gross and indecent sin, *they were dragging Christ into it*.

Sometimes we say that the principle by which any action may be judged is: Can I take Christ there? There is truth in that. But it is not the whole truth. For, Paul emphasizes, we have no choice in the matter. *We do* take Christ there. As those who are

united to him we cannot leave him behind. So the real question is: Can I take Christ there and look him in the face without shame? Is this course of action, this decision I am taking, totally consistent with my personal confession that "Jesus Christ is my Lord"?

Again it should be emphasized that on its own this question is of limited help. It may answer my questions about the Lord's will immediately (particularly if the answer is 'No'), but it is not in itself an all-sufficient test. It is not the final litmus paper by which we can judge the Lord's will. We need to take all these questions into consideration. We may find, having sought to answer them all, that there is still a momentous decision which God expects us to make. But it can hardly be doubted that much confused thinking began to be cleared away from the church at Corinth as these penetrating questions were set before them. We too will find the same.

5. Is it Helpful to Others?

When we move further on in the First Letter to Corinth, we find Paul asks similar questions of a different situation - an indication that we are on the right track when we assume that these questions have a wide and valuable application to many areas of our thinking. But he added others.

I must not rest content with asking whether a course of action will be personally helpful. Will it have a like beneficial effect on others? Indeed, do I engage in it with a view to serving and helping them? Or, am I in danger of "destroying the work of God"? [Rom 14:20] When speaking of the Christian's personal freedom, and the way it must be balanced over against the weakness and strengths of others, Paul confesses: "I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good, but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example . . ." [1 Cor 10:33].

Jesus lived by this principle. When he summarized his commitment in his great prayer to the Father, he said: "I am sanctifying myself *for their sakes*" [John 17:19]. We should be concerned to help and please others. Paul affirms, "For even Christ did not please himself" [Rom 15:3]. Does this not drive home to us the fact that the will of God (and therefore his guidance) is the most demanding thing in the world? does it not pierce to the dividing place in our lives between soul and spirit? [Heb 4:12] For we are often concerned with guidance in order that our lives may be freed from anxiety and uncertainty - so that we may have a measure of personal comfort and security. God, on the other hand, is concerned that we should be cast upon Him to do His will, *whatever the enduring cost*. The will of God is shaped in the image of His Son's Cross. The will of God means death to our own will, and resurrection only when we have died to all our own plans.

Did we really appreciate that this was what we were letting ourselves in for when we said that we wanted guidance?

6. Is it Consistent with Biblical Example?

Do not be surprised that Paul's discussion reaches its conclusion with these words: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" [1Cor 11:1]. "What would Paul have done?" "What would Christ Himself have done?" these are the questions we can now ask. Are there incidents, or is there teaching in Scripture, which can be applied to the situation in which I find myself? Will it give me a clue to the will of God for my life now? [Cf. Phil 3:17; 2 Thess 3:7; 2 Tim 3:10; Heb 6:12; 13:7].

We are not left to our own imagination in dealing with this question. The only Christ we know - for that matter the only Paul we know - is to be found in the pages of Scripture. Here again we are driven back to our great principle: we discover the will of God by a sensitive application of Scripture to our own lives.

The apostle Peter speaks in similar vein. Christ suffered for us, and in doing so He left us an example that we should follow in His footsteps [1 Peter 2:21]. He uses a very picturesque word, which means a model of pattern to be copied. It is the kind of expression we would use of a teacher's light pencil outline which a child would fill in with a heavier hand, and fill out in his own unique way. What a picture of the Christian life! Christ teaches us to live by faith by walking His life before us, and then saying: "Now, put your feet into these footprints of mine, and you will soon learn".

This is exactly what we are to do. We are to go over the lines, which Christ has drawn in, lines, which we find in the Scriptures. We are to take His hand, and find His footprints in Scripture, and then to follow them. Because of his apostolic ministry Paul was able to encourage his contemporaries to follow him because he followed Christ. There is still an application of that which will benefit us in our thinking.

Yet, even here, Paul cannot escape from the ultimate challenge, "whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" [1 Cor 10:31]. We cannot escape this challenge either. It is the non-negotiable norm of Christian living. If my heart goes out for His glory, then I will find the yoke of these questions easy, and the burden of gospel holiness to which they urge me is light indeed:

Is it lawful? Is it beneficial? Is it enslaving? Is it consistent with the Lordship of Christ? Is it beneficial to others? Is it consistent with the example of Christ and the apostles? Is it for the glory of God? For that matter, am I living for the glory of God?

*The task Thy wisdom hath assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfil,
In all my works Thy presence find,
And prove Thy good and perfect will.
Thee may I set at my right hand,
Whose eyes my inmost substance see,
And labour on at Thy command,
And offer all my works to Thee.
Give me to bear Thy easy yoke,
And every moment watch and pray,
And still to things eternal look,
And hasten to Thy glorious day*
Charles Wesley

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The Lord Told Me – I Think!

By Gary Gilley of Southern View Chapel

http://www.svchapel.org/resources/Articles/read_articles.asp?ID=115

(September 2005 - Volume 11, Issue 9)

In a newsletter published by a conservative Baptist denomination, a story is presented concerning one of its members. Deployed in Iraq, this middle aged soldier revealed that often, as he wrestles with problems of various types, "God just reveals the answer to me." A leader from his church back home also claims to have heard from the Lord. "The Lord told me," he says, "That this young man is going to be known as a builder, not a destroyer in Iraq." So far his prophecy seems to have come true for, although the soldier has been involved in combat, his "day job" is to rebuild schools and water treatment plants. Just this week I received an e-mail from a gentleman who wrote, "Jesus has commanded me through the Holy Spirit to teach people how to pray, teach them the truth about their dreams, and guide them into the presence of God (utilizing the Scripture in an almost step-by-step methodology to do so)."

It seems the Lord has been quite busy lately speaking to His children. A few years ago Alistair Begg quoted a survey stating that one in three American adults say that God speaks to them directly.^[1] And hearing the voice of God is not isolated to the common person either. A slew of evangelical leaders claim to hear from the Lord, some of them quite regularly. Henry Blackaby, an avid proponent of extrabiblical revelation of this type, when asked how he knew he was hearing from God and not from some other source, gives this answer, "You come to know His voice as you experience Him in a love relationship. As God speaks and you respond, you will come to the point that you

recognize His voice more and more clearly.”[2]

Is God Speaking Today?

Of course, that leaves dangling the important question, “How does one know he is hearing the voice of the Lord in the first place?” Is it not possible that the voice many believe they are “hearing” is the voice of their own thoughts, imaginations, desires, or something more insidious?

In vogue in much of evangelicalism is the constant imploring of Christians to listen to God, experience God and feel God. D. A. Carson quoting a friend’s insightful critique of a book entitled *Listening to God*, wrote, “If anyone had written a book thirty years ago with that title, you would have expected it to be about Bible study, not about prayer....

Many [Christians] now rely far more on inward promptings than on their Bible knowledge to decide what they are going to do in a situation.”[3] There seems to have been a powerful shift in thinking among conservative Christians during the last few decades.

What does the New Testament Teach?

The final court of appeals determining the identity of the voice of God, if it is such, must be the direct instructions or at least the examples found in Scripture. The Scriptures claim to be the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2 Peter 1:20, 21). They are inspired, once for all, by the Holy Spirit, enabling prophets and apostles, using their own personalities, to write God’s words as He intended (Hebrews 1:1,2; 2:3,4; Acts 5:12; 2 Corinthians 12:12). I believe ***with the closure of Scripture, direct, infallible, authoritative revelation from God has ceased for this age*** (Revelation 22:18, 19; Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; Jude 3, 4; 2 Peter 3:2). It is instructive to note when Paul wrote his last epistle to pastor/friend Timothy about leading the church of God, he did not encourage Timothy to focus on new revelations, impressions, feelings or hunches. Rather, he ***continually turned him to the Word of God and the doctrines contained therein*** (2 Timothy 2:2-14, 15; 3:15-17; 4:2-4).

I find this to be the emphasis of the New Testament. As Donald S. Whitney reminds us, The evangelistic method of Jesus and the apostles was not to urge people to seek direct experiences with God; instead they went about preaching and teaching the Scriptures (see, for instance, Mark 1:14-15). And Jesus did not say that once we have spiritual life we live by direct mystical experience with God; rather, we “live ... on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). That includes the “good work” of growing in the knowledge of God and likeness to Christ. So in Scripture the normative method of meeting God is through Scripture.[4]

Other Issues to Consider

Yet, this type of Divine encounter is considered insipid by many believers today. Many insist if God desires to relate to us in deep, personal, intimate ways, surely He must speak to us directly, individually, apart from Scripture. If we do not have such experiences, then we are nothing more than “practical deists.” What has led to this mindset that teaches the Scriptures are inadequate for our lives – that some additional revelation is needed? Let me list three competitors now challenging the Scriptures as final authority in our lives.

Subjective Experience

In relation to our subject we must thoroughly wrestle with the question of how we know

who or what we have encountered in our subjective experiences. All the information we have about God and our relationship to Him is found in the Bible. Any “encounter” apart from Scripture must be verified by Scripture. If that is so, what does the Word tell us to expect in an encounter with God? I think you will search in vain for information on what God “feels” like; instead the biblical record speaks of transformation. When we encounter God at the moment of salvation we are born again (John 3). As Christians encounter God, through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the mark is changed lives (2 Peter 1).

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones was on to something when he wrote,

Let us imagine I follow the mystic way. I begin to have experiences; I think God is speaking to me; how do I know it is God who is speaking to me? How can I know I am not speaking to man; how can I be sure that I am not the victim of hallucinations, since this has happened to many of the mystics? If I believe in mysticism as such without the Bible, how do I know I am not being deluded by Satan as an angel of light in order to keep me from the true and living God? I have no standard.... The evangelical doctrine tells me not to look into myself but to look into the Word of God; not to examine myself, but to look at the revelation that has been given to me. It tells me that God can only be known in His own way, the way which has been revealed in the Scriptures themselves.[\[5\]](#)

Of course, the current bent toward the subjective rather than the biblical is nothing new. In each age it seems there are pockets of God’s people (sometimes bigger pockets than others) who want to go beyond Scripture for their spiritual experiences.

Sinclair Ferguson writes, in Calvin’s day, “The Spiritual Ones” were a major thorn in the flesh to biblical reformation. Calvin despaired of helping people who felt the need to mention the Spirit in every second sentence they spoke! For the Puritans, the “Inner Light” movement constituted a similar danger. In both cases “what the Spirit said” and “what the [human] spirit heard” were divorced from and then exalted over the Word. Put more brutally, subjective feeling and emotion reigned supreme over the objective revelation of Scripture. Similarly, today the subjective, experiential, self-oriented, “touchy-feely” secular mind of the 1960s has come home to roost in the evangelical world.[\[6\]](#)

“Our age,” Udo W. Middelman laments, “Has largely replaced real discussions of theological, philosophical, and cultural content with ‘personal’ testimony, anecdotal experience, and private views.”[\[7\]](#)

A New Kind of Revelation—New Testament Prophecy

In Colossians 2:18,19 Paul addresses a people confused by mystical experiences. The forerunners to the Gnostics taught that a few elite had received the gift of direct inspiration through the Holy Spirit. These moments of inspiration took place through visions, dreams and encounters with angels.[\[8\]](#) This divided the church into two classes, the haves and the have-nots (those who imagined themselves as truly spiritual and those who had not had these experiences).

This kind of problem has not faded into the past and is almost identical to the teachings found within various elements of the charismatic movement today. For example, compare what Jack Deere, a leading Vineyard theologian writes:

God can and does give personal words of direction to believers today that cannot be found in the Bible. I do not believe that he gives direction that contradicts the Bible, but

direction that cannot be found in the Bible.^[9]

But how does a person know if he is really hearing from God, Wayne Grudem, another Vineyard theologian who is a wholesale believer in extrabiblical revelations of all kinds, answers:

Did the revelation *seem like* something from the Holy Spirit; did it *seem* to be similar to other experiences of the Holy Spirit which he had known previously in worship. Beyond this it is difficult to specify much further, except to say that over time a congregation would *probably* become more adept at making evaluations...and become more adept at recognizing a genuine revelation from the Holy Spirit and distinguishing it from their own thoughts (emphasis mine).^[10]

Grudem is arguably the most careful and well-respected charismatic theologian in the country. He taught Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity International University in Deerfield, Illinois, for twenty years (which is affiliated with the Evangelical Free Churches of America). Yet, the best that he can devise in answer to our concern is, "Did it *seem like* the Holy Spirit" and, "A congregation would *probably*" be able to get better at discernment over time. While we are fumbling around trying to decide if something felt like the Holy Spirit (nothing in the Bible helps us here) and hoping that we will get better at discerning the voice of God, others, such as Henry Blackaby tell us that we dare not even make a move until we are certain that we have heard from God. Pity the poor Christian caught up in this confusion — he is hopelessly tossed about on a sea of subjectivity and mysticism.

At this point, Blackaby, Deere and Grudem would cry foul. They would claim that while they believe that God speaks to His people apart from the Bible today, these revelations are not on par with Scripture. That is, God speaks today but not with the same authority as He did in His Word. So do not accuse us of adding to Scripture, they would say. Interestingly enough, this brings up another issue. Does God ever speak in a nonauthoritative manner? In the biblical record we find that God did speak, either orally (including through His prophets) or through the written Word. But always, **His Word was authoritative**. It was nothing less than a word from God — one that could be understood and must be obeyed and heeded! But we are being told today that God is speaking in a different, less authoritative, even impure way.

This is how Wayne Grudem explains it:

There is almost uniform testimony from all sections of the charismatic movement that prophecy is imperfect and impure, and will contain some elements which are not to be obeyed or trusted. The Anglican charismatic leaders Dennis and Rita Bennett write, "We are not expected to accept every word spoken through the gifts of utterance...but we are only to accept what is quickened to us by the Holy Spirit and is in agreement with the Bible...one manifestation may be 75% God, but 25% the person's own thought. We must discern between the two."^[11]

But how? Where is Grudem taking us? Grudem's contention is that New Testament prophecy is different from Old Testament prophecy. True Old Testament prophecy was a direct revelation from God and thus infallible, with the prophet forfeiting his life if he was in error (Deuteronomy 13:5; 18:20-22). But New Testament prophecy, including modern day efforts, so says Grudem, can be fallible. A New Testament prophecy could be partially from God and partially from ourselves. Thus, the Christian must attempt to discern where God leaves off and where man begins. And we are to make this

determination without any insight from the New Testament which is totally silent on the subject. I believe Grudem to be in serious error, leaving the believer with no “sure word of prophecy.” Nevertheless, his view is gaining popularity even among conservative theologians and leaders.

A New Kind of Revelation—The “Inner” Voice

Noncharismatic evangelical Christianity has definitely taken on a mystical bent in recent days as well. While never denying the authority of Scripture as such, many, from people in the pew to key evangelical leaders, regularly point to mystical experiences as the basis for much of what they do and believe. We must be concerned that this weak view of the Scriptures will ultimately cause great harm in the body of Christ. We agree with David Well's assessment, "Granting the status of revelation to anything other than the Word of God inevitably has the effect of removing that status from the Word of God. What may start out as an additional authority alongside the Word of God will eventually supplant its authority altogether."^[12] John Armstrong concurs, “Direct communication from God, by definition, constitutes some form of new revelation. Such revelation would, at least in principle, indicate that the Scriptures were not sufficient or final.”^[13]

At issue is the subject of **revelation**. More to the point, is God speaking today, directly, infallibly, and independently of the Scriptures? Does He reveal Himself, His will, His truth, apart from the Bible? Critics of the position presented in this paper will tell us to look at the examples found in Scripture. God seemed to be speaking all the time to all sorts of people, apart from the written Word. This is a clear overstatement, although there is surely some truth to be found. Let's make some observations. First, God did speak apart from the written Word occasionally. When we read the Bible we sometimes forget that what we are reading in a matter of minutes may have covered vast periods of time originally. Abraham, for example, definitely heard the voice of God at times. God speaks to him in Genesis 15 and again in Genesis 17. But there was at least a 14 year gap between the two utterances from God and possibly 20 years or more (compare 16:16 with 17:1). It seems to us that God was talking to Abraham all the time but the fact is that many years would go by with no communication from God at all – even to Abraham the friend of God and father of the Jewish race. This leads to the next observation: when God did speak it was almost always to prophets and key players in the biblical story, not to the common man or woman. There may have been a few exceptions to this, but if so, it was rare. Yet, many today act as if God speaks to everyone all the time, and they attempt to prop up this view through biblical accounts. But the Scriptures simply do not support this idea.

There is a third observation that I believe is often missed and is of great importance to this discussion. When God did speak in Scripture, whether directly or through His prophets, He did so with audible words. You will search in vain for some inner voice from God speaking to the heart of His people. Nor will you find God communicating through prompting or hunches. No one said, “I feel the Lord leading me to do such and such.” No one said, “I have the peace of God in this decision.” In other words, God's people have created a means of communication from God not found in the Bible. God never spoke in this fashion in Scripture, but we now are to believe that this is the norm today. In an otherwise excellent chapter on this same subject, R. Fowler White, who takes a cessationist view (with the closure of the Scriptures, God is no longer giving revelation for this age) opens the door to this form of communication by writing, “God

guides and directs His people by His Spirit in the application of His written word through promptings, impressions, insights, and the like.”^[14] Vineyard theologian Jack Deere, in one of his few on-target remarks, sees clearly the weakness in White’s statement, First, he doesn’t offer a single text of Scripture to support his assertion that God’s practical leading is carefully distinguished from the Spirit’s work of revelation.... White is simply asserting a distinction that not only can not be supported by Scripture, but, in fact, contradicts the Bible.... [Secondly] how does White know God guides through promptings, impressions, insights, and the like? He can’t use the Bible to prove this assertion.... White is asking us to believe in a form of guidance that can’t even be found in the Bible!^[15]

Deere is right. Many are telling us that God is speaking in a third way today, a way never found, described or hinted at in the Bible: God is speaking today but His Word is not authoritative, and what we think we are hearing can be weighed, examined and even dismissed. We are not even certain when and if He is speaking. And those who feel certain they are hearing from God still believe that the revelation may be partly in error. It remains a mystery to me why people are attracted to this view of the Word of God. *Surely* it is not an improvement over, **"Thus says the Lord."** *Surely* the uncertainty of this system pales in comparison to the certainty of the Scriptures (**2 Peter 1:19-21**).

^[1] Alistair Begg, *What Angels Wish They Knew* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), p. 13.

^[2] Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and doing the Will of God* (Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publisher, 1994), p. 88.

^[3] D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 506.

^[4] Donald S. Whitney, “Unity of Doctrine and Devotion,” in *The Compromised Church*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1998), p. 246.

^[5] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship with God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), p. 95.

^[6] Sinclair B. Ferguson, “The Evangelical Ministry: the Puritan Contribution,” in *The Compromised Church*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1998), p. 272.

^[7] Udo W. Middelmann, *The Market Driven Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), p. 61.

^[8] Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), pp. 49, 139-142, 163-166).

^[9] Jack Deere, “Vineyard Position Paper #2,” p. 15.

^[10] Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 120-121.

^[11] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

^[12] David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 109.

^[13] John H. Armstrong, ed., *The Compromised Church*, “The Evangelical Ministry: a Tragic Loss,” (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1998), p. 272.

^[14] R. Fowler White, “Does God Speak Today Apart from the Bible?” in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1996), p.

79.

[15] Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 283-384

What Is the Will of God and How Do We Know It?

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By John Piper August 22, 2004

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The aim of Romans 12:1-2 is that all of life would become “spiritual worship.” Verse 1: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” The aim of all human life in God’s eyes is that Christ would be made to look as valuable as he is. Worship means using our minds and hearts and bodies to express the worth of God and all he is for us in Jesus. There is a way to live—a way to love—that does that. There is a way to do your job that expresses the true value of God. If you can’t find it, that may mean you should change jobs. Or it might mean that verse 2 is not happening to the degree it should.

Verse 2 is Paul’s answer to how we turn all of life into worship. We must be transformed. *We must be transformed.* Not just our external behavior, but the way we feel and think—our minds. Verse 2: “Be transformed *by the renewal of your mind.*”

Become What You Are

Those who believe in Christ Jesus are already blood-bought new creatures in Christ. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). But now we must *become* what we *are*. “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you *really are* unleavened” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

“You *have* put on the new self, which is *being renewed* in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:10). You *have been* made new in Christ; and now you are *being renewed* day by day. That’s what we focused on last week.

Now we focus on the last part of verse 2, namely, the aim of the renewed mind: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, [now here comes the aim] *that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*” So our focus today is on the meaning of the term “will of God,” and how we discern it.

The Two Wills of God

There are two clear and very different meanings for the term “will of God” in the Bible. We need to know them and decide which one is being used here in Romans 12:2. In fact, knowing the difference between these two meanings of “the will of God” is crucial to understanding one of the biggest and most perplexing things in all the Bible, namely, that God is sovereign over all things and yet disapproves of many things. Which means that God disapproves of some of what he ordains to happen. That is, he forbids some of the things he brings about. And he commands some of the things he hinders. Or to put it most paradoxically: God wills some events in one sense that he does not will in another sense.

1. God’s Will of Decree, or Sovereign Will

Let’s see the passages of Scripture that make us think this way. First consider passages that describe “the will of God” as his sovereign control of all that comes to pass. One of the clearest is the way Jesus spoke of the will of God in Gethsemane when he was praying. He said, in Matthew 26:39, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as *you will*.” What does the will of God refer to in this verse? It refers to the sovereign plan of God that will happen in the coming hours. You recall how Acts 4:27-28 says this: “Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” So the “will of God” was that Jesus die. This was his plan, his decree. There was not changing it, and Jesus bowed and said, “Here’s my request, but you do what is best to do.” That’s the sovereign will of God. And don’t miss the very crucial point here that it includes the sins of man. Herod, Pilate, the soldiers, the Jewish leaders—they all sinned in fulfilling God’s will that his Son be crucified (Isaiah 53:10). So be very clear on this: God wills to come to pass some things that he hates.

Here’s an example from 1 Peter. In 1 Peter 3:17 Peter writes, “It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.” In other words, it may be God’s will that Christians suffer for doing good. He has in mind persecution. But persecution of Christians who do not deserve it, is sin. So again, God sometimes wills that events come about that include sin. “It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will.”

Paul gives a sweeping summary statement of this truth in Ephesians 1:11, “In him [Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works *all things according to the counsel of his will*.” The will of God is God’s sovereign governance of all that comes to pass. And there are many other passages in the Bible that teach that God’s providence over the universe extends to the smallest details of nature and human decisions. Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father in heaven (Matthew 10:29). “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (Proverbs 16:33). “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is

from the Lord” (Proverbs 16:1). “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will” (Proverbs 21:1).

That’s the first meaning of the will of God: it is God’s sovereign control of all things. We will call this his “sovereign will” or his “will of decree.” It cannot be broken. It always comes to pass. “He does according to *his will* among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” (Daniel 4:35).

2. God’s Will of Command

Now the other meaning for “the will of God” in the Bible is what we can call his “will of command.” His will is what he commands us to do. This is the will of God we can disobey and fail to do. The will of decree we do whether we believe in it or not. The will of command we can fail to do. For example, Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Not all do the will of his father. He says so. “Not everyone will enter the kingdom of heaven.” Why? Because not all do the will of God.

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.” Here we have a very specific instance of what God commands of us: holiness, sanctification, sexual purity. This is his will of command. But, oh, so many do not obey.

Then Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” There again is a specific aspect of his will of command: give thanks in all circumstances. But many do not do this will of God.

One more example: “And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17). Not all abide forever. Some do. Some don’t. The difference? Some do the will of God. Some don’t. The will of God, in this sense, does not always happen.

So I conclude from these and many other passages of the Bible that there are two ways of talking about the will of God. Both are true, and both are important to understand and believe in. One we can call God’s *will of decree* (or his sovereign will) and the other we can call God’s *will of command*. His will of decree always comes to pass whether we believe in it or not. His will of command can be broken, and is every day.

The Preciousness of These Truths

Before I relate this to Romans 12:2 let me comment on how precious these two truths are. Both correspond to a deep need that we all have when we are deeply hurt or experience great loss. On the one hand, we need the assurance that God is in control and therefore is able to work all of my pain and loss together for my good and the good of all who love him. On the other hand, we need to know that God empathizes with us and does not delight in sin or pain in and of themselves. These two needs correspond to God’s will of decree and his will of command.

For example, if you were badly abused as a child, and someone asks you, “Do you think that was the will of God?” you now have a way to make some

biblical sense out of this, and give an answer that doesn't contradict the Bible. You may say, "No it was not God's will; because he commands that humans not be abusive, but love each other. The abuse broke his commandment and therefore moved his heart with anger and grief (Mark 3:5). But, in another sense, yes, it was God's will (his sovereign will), because there are a hundred ways he could have stopped it. But for reasons I don't yet fully understand, he didn't."

And corresponding to these two wills are the two things you need in this situation: one is a God who is strong and sovereign enough to turn it for good; and the other is a God who is able to empathize with you. On the one hand, Christ is a sovereign High King, and nothing happens apart from his will (Matthew 28:18). On the other hand, Christ is a merciful High Priest and sympathizes with our weaknesses and pain (Hebrews 4:15). The Holy Spirit conquers us and our sins when he wills (John 1:13; Romans 9:15-16), and allows himself to be quenched and grieved and angered when he wills (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). His sovereign will is invincible, and his will of command can be grievously broken.

We need both these truths—both these understandings of the will of God—not only to make sense out of the Bible, but to hold fast to God in suffering.

Which Will Is Referred to in Romans 12:2?

Now, which of these is meant in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is *the will of God*, what is good and acceptable and perfect." The answer surely is that Paul is referring to God's will of command.

I say this for at least two reasons. One is that God does not intend for us to know most of his sovereign will ahead of time. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us" (Deuteronomy 29:29). If you want to know the future details of God's will of decree, you don't want a renewed mind, you want a crystal ball. This is not called transformation and obedience; it's called divination, soothsaying.

The other reason I say that the will of God in Romans 12:2 is God's will of command and not his will of decree is that the phrase "**by testing you may discern**" implies that we should approve of the will of God and then obediently do it. But in fact we should not approve of sin or do it, even though it is part of God's sovereign will. Paul's meaning in Romans 12:2 is paraphrased almost exactly in Hebrews 5:14, which says, "Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." (See another paraphrase in Philippians 1:9-11.) That's the goal of this verse: **not ferreting out the *secret* will of God that he *plans* to do, but discerning the *revealed* will of God that we *ought* to do.**

Three Stages of Knowing and Doing the Revealed Will of God

There are three stages of knowing and doing the revealed will of God, that is, his will of command; and all of them require the renewed mind with its Holy-Spirit-given discernment that we talked about last time.

Stage One

First, God's will of command is revealed with final, decisive authority only in the Bible. And we need the renewed mind to understand and embrace what God commands in the Scripture. Without the renewed mind, we will distort the Scriptures to avoid their radical commands for self-denial, and love, and purity, and supreme satisfaction in Christ alone. **God's authoritative will of command is found only in the Bible. Paul says that the Scriptures are inspired and make the Christian "competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16). Not just some good works. "Every good work." Oh, what energy and time and devotion Christians should spend meditating on the written Word of God.**

Stage Two

The second stage of God's will of command is our application of the biblical truth to new situations that may or may not be explicitly addressed in the Bible. The Bible does not tell you which person to marry, or which car to drive, or whether to own a home, where you take your vacation, what cell-phone plan to buy, or which brand of orange juice to drink. Or a thousand other choices you must make.

What is necessary is that we have a renewed mind, that is so shaped and so governed by the revealed will of God in the Bible, that we see and assess all relevant factors with the mind of Christ, and discern what God is calling us to do. This is very different from constantly trying to hear God's voice saying do this and do that. People who try to lead their lives by hearing voices are not in sync with Romans 12:2.

There is a world of difference between praying and laboring for a renewed mind that discerns how to apply God's Word, on the one hand, and the habit of asking God to give you new revelation of what to do, on the other hand.

Divination does not require transformation. God's aim is a new mind, a new way of thinking and judging, not just new information. His aim is that we be transformed, sanctified, freed by the truth of his revealed Word (John 8:32; 17:17). So the second stage of God's will of command is the discerning application of the Scriptures to new situations in life by means of a renewed mind.

Stage Three

Finally, the third stage of God's will of command is the vast majority of living where there is no conscious reflection before we act. I venture to say that a good **95% of your behavior you do not premeditate. That is, most of your thoughts, attitudes, and actions are spontaneous. They are just spillover from what's inside.** Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak" (Matthew 12:34-36).

Why do I call this part of God's will of command? For one reason. Because God commands things like: Don't be angry. Don't be prideful. Don't covet. Don't be anxious. Don't be jealous. Don't envy. And none of those actions are premeditated. Anger, pride, covetousness, anxiety, jealousy, envy—they all just rise up out of the heart with no conscious reflection or intention. And we are guilty because of them. They break the commandment of God.

Is it not plain therefore that there is one great task of the Christian life: Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. We need new hearts and new minds. Make the tree good and the fruit will be good (Matthew 12:33). That's the great challenge. That is what God calls you to. You can't do it on your own. You need Christ, who died for your sins. And you need the Holy Spirit to lead you into Christ-exalting truth and work in you truth-embracing humility.

Give yourself to this. Immerse yourself in the written Word of God; saturate your mind with it. And pray that the Spirit of Christ would make you so new that the spillover would be good, acceptable, and perfect—the will of God.

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