

Sound Living

The Word of God

This study includes extensive notes of other authors on revelation, illumination, how God speaks today and knowing the will of God.

Jerry Nelson

God's word. The inspired words of God. Special revelation. Illumination. How do we hear from God today? Does God speak to us outside Scripture? Is that small voice a new word from God? The "Word of God" study looks at how God speaks to His people today. It also includes over 100 pages of additional resources for further study.

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Chapter One

"How May I Know God? - The Essential Word"

2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21

- You say you believe in God; what God? How do you know anything about Him?
- You say you believe in life after death. How do you know anything about life after death?
- You say you believe in heaven and maybe even in hell. How do you know anything about those places?

For all of recorded history, humans have written about a God or gods. Belief in an afterlife is common from antiquity to the present. All civilizations of all the ages have believed in some kind of paradise. Conjecture on such themes is as old as mankind. Whether it was the ancient Persians studying the stars or Jodie Foster in the movie "Contact" searching outer space, men and women have wondered if there is anything or anyone "out there" or are we alone in the universe. Do you believe in God and the afterlife simply because those ideas are part of the fabric of civilization? Do you truly know anything about God? How can we know?

A question we ask today was asked at least 4000 years ago by a man named Zophar in conversation with Job, "*Can you, by searching, find out God?*"(Job 11:7 KJV)

- The greatest minds can sit and ponder the deepest thoughts.
- The keenest observers can scan the skies and plumb the depths.

But how can we know God and what can we know about Him?

Through the millennia people have proposed answers. Two have been dubbed the ontological and cosmological arguments for the existence of God. More recently those arguments have been made in what is called the "Intelligent Design" theory. 3000 years ago the songwriter, philosopher David wrote, "*The heavens declare the glory of God.*" 2000 years ago the Apostle Paul wrote "*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, so that men are without excuse.*" (Romans 1:20) Yes, it is true, our very existence and the existence of the universe around us argue for the logical necessity of a supreme being—someone out there beyond us.

But how can we know and how can we know Him? How can we answer those questions when we are locked in our little world, when we are merely talking to ourselves? We can guess, we can philosophize, we can imagine but can we know? Mystical experiences described by others don't help. They tell us more about the individual than they do about the god they think they saw or heard from. And "near death" experiences don't tell us anything about death. And we can imagine God in all kinds of ways but we don't know if such ideas even come close to reality.

And so we cannot KNOW God unless God reveals Himself to us. And so the life and death question is, "Has God revealed Himself to us?" It is true, as I noted earlier, that the "heavens" declare the glory of God and "what is made" tells us that God exists and is powerful but they can not tell us anymore about that God than a painting does about the painter. It's good information but it is not enough. Has God revealed more? Or to say it differently, "Has God spoken?"

The answer is "Yes!" Yes, God has spoken; God has revealed Himself to us. The high and lofty one, the Creator of the universe, the transcendent holy God of eternity has chosen to allow us to know Him not only in His power but also in His mercy and grace. How has He spoken to us? Ah, finally I have come to the point!

God's Word

This, this Holy Bible, is God's Word to us! This is God's revelation of Himself to us that we may know Him. This is how we may know from whence we came, why we are here and where we are going. This is how we may know that life is more than three score and ten years and more than the sum of our acquisitions. This is how we know the someone who is "out there" and we aren't merely talking to ourselves.

Our very existence and the existence of the universe around us argue for the logical necessity of a supreme being—someone out there beyond us.

Listen to what the Bible claims. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "*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, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.*" God was not silent; He spoke! And He speaks yet today through His Word. 2 Timothy 3:15-16 reminds us, "*From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed...*"

The Apostle Paul wrote that the Scripture, the Bible, is the product of the creative breath of God. Some want us to

believe the Bible is merely the words of men about God. But the Bible will have none of that. The Psalmist said, in Psalm 33:6, "*By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host (made) by the breath of his mouth.*" And the Apostle said Scripture is likewise God-breathed into existence. As surely as God created the world, so He created the Bible. The Apostle Peter said it this way: "*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.*" (2 Peter 1:21) No, we do not believe that God dictated the words and that the human authors were merely transcribers. We do believe the writers were so influenced in their thinking by the Holy Spirit of God that every word they used was guided by the Spirit to write exactly what God wanted written, even though it was written in the styles of the over 30 authors over 1500 years.

Jesus believed the Bible was, word for word, the Words of God. He said in Matthew 5:17-18, "*Do not think that I came to abolish the law and the prophets (the Scriptures); I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.*"

The point is that the Bible claims to be the Word of God – God's words to us.

- Acts 1:16 says, "*Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David.*" Who spoke through David? The Holy Spirit.
- Acts 3:18 says, "*But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets.*" Who foretold through the prophets? God.

- Jeremiah penned, "*The word of the LORD came to me, saying...*"(1:4)
- Hosea 1:4 says, "*Then the LORD said to Hosea...*"
- And, Micah 1:1 affirms, "*The word of the LORD that came to Micah...*"

Whose words were spoken through Jeremiah, Hosea and Micah? The Lord's Word. Who does Jesus say will be the source of what the Apostles would write? The Spirit of God. John 16:13 says, "*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you things that are to come.*" So how would the New Testament writers know what to teach and write? The Spirit of God. Read Paul's words to the Corinthians: "*We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who*

Jesus believed the Bible was, word for word, the Words of God.

is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."(1 Corinthians 2:12-13)

I want you to think again about how essential the Bible is to your life. You may know something, even much, about finance, education, health, and a host of other things of life here and now but apart from the Bible you won't know anything trustworthy about the why of life or of all that exists beyond what we can see, hear and touch. I want you to realize that though you may live 70 or 80 years, apart from what God reveals about Himself in His Word you live in a closed universe that is a true dead end. I want you to realize that only through the Bible can you know God in a saving and relational way. I want you to begin or continue

to see the Bible as the source and sustenance of your life – it's why the Psalmist says of God's words in Psalm 19:10:

*"They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb."*

Thus far I have used the Bible to support my idea that the Bible is the Word of God. Why should I believe the Bible? Because Jesus did! But how do I know that Jesus believed the Bible to be the Word of God? Because the Bible says so. At that point, you will likely charge me with circular reasoning. But read carefully and you will see that it is not circular reasoning.

***Jesus did what He said He would do and
He is who He claimed to be.***

To demonstrate that, I begin by thinking of the Bible not as a divine book but as a collection of writings that claim to bear witness to historical events. Just as I would need to decide if any book of history was credible, so I must decide if these writings called the books of Exodus, Psalms, John, and others are believable. If both internal and external evidence supports them as being written by who claims to have written them and if what they purport to be true is witnessed also by other believable people and if what they claim is the best explanation of what happened then I can begin to trust what they say. That's the methodology used with any book of history

The most important example of that is the resurrection of Jesus. That Jesus lived most don't doubt. That He died most would readily accept. But that He rose again from the dead challenges credibility because it is beyond our normal

experience. But the records of at least four historical books (the Gospels) and the eyewitness testimony of others say Jesus did rise from the dead. Furthermore only the resurrection of Jesus makes sense of all that was predicted of Him for over a thousand years, only the resurrection makes sense of what He did while here on earth and only the resurrection makes sense of what happened following His resurrection. I can then draw the reasonable conclusion that Jesus did what He said He would do and He is who He claimed to be. And then, and only then, do I accept these books as THE Word of God because Jesus, the resurrected one, said they are.

Throughout His time on earth, Jesus treated the Bible as God's revelation of Himself to us. Jesus continually treated every word of the Scriptures as authoritatively true:

- Matthew 19:4-Jesus affirms Adam and Eve of Genesis 2:24
- Matthew 23:35-He affirms Cain and Abel
- Matthew 24:38ff-He affirms the flood
- Matthew 12:40-He affirms Jonah's being swallowed by a large fish.

Jesus regarded the Bible as completely reliable in all matters it addresses including theology, history and science. John 10:34-36 says, "*Jesus answered them, 'Is it not written in your Law, "I have said you are gods"? If he called them "gods," to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken—what about the one whom the Father set apart as His very own and sent into the world?"*" Jesus equates the "Law," "the word of God" and "the Scripture." And when the resurrected Jesus says the Bible is the Word of God, I both may and must take Him very seriously. Again, this Holy Bible is God's Word to us.

Most of you know that the Bible is an anthology, a compendium of many books of history, sermons, poems

and prophecies. And they are initially the literature of two peoples—The Old Testament's Israel and the New Testament's church. It is understandable that some people would think of the Bible as merely the collection of the stories and writings of ancient peoples. How are the books of Genesis, 1 Samuel, Luke or Acts God's Word to us? How is history the Revelation of God?

Any reader of the Old or New Testaments quickly recognizes that many things that must have happened in those times are not recorded. Much more happened than what is written. Why only particular events? God's Spirit superintended the remembering and recording of those specific events that became part of Holy Scripture. The point is that God chose to reveal Himself in those particular

***The Bible (is) both a record of history
and the Word of God.***

events and in those particular writings. For example, when God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt it was not only to free the people, it was more so to reveal God's power and faithfulness. Look at Exodus 6:6-7: "*Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians... I will take you as my own people and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians'.*" The people would come to know God by His mighty actions in history.

The same was true of Jesus. Even when John the Baptist asked if Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus didn't say listen; He said watch me, see what I do. But hear this: God did not simply do something and leave it to the people to figure out what it meant. God accompanied the event sometimes with a prediction of it and sometimes with an explanation of it

afterward—God interpreted the event.

Theologian, Eldon Ladd describes it this way: "Here is the biblical mode of revelation: the revealing acts of God in history, accompanied by the interpreting prophetic word which explains the divine source and character of the divine acts...The deeds could not be understood unless accompanied by the divine word; and the word would seem powerless unless accompanied by the mighty works. Both the acts and the words are divine events, coming from God."¹

The Old and New Testaments are not merely history books but most importantly they are interpreted events revealing the character of God. Again from Ladd, "The Bible (is) both a record of history and the Word of God. The Bible is both the account of God's redeeming acts, and the prophetic Word of God interpreting these acts... The New Testament is bound together by this same prophetic motif: the self-revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, and the divinely given interpretation of the meaning of this great historical event."² And they are not dead history. They are alive, still revealing God to me as the Holy Spirit illuminates my mind and heart to see God in those events.

That history of Israel and that history of the early church is my history. Those poems and messages and prophecies are my heritage. Just as I might recall what appeared to be the mercy of God to a grandparent of mine in a specific situation, with much more confidence I can recall what my God did to my "father" Abraham because in the Bible God has interpreted that event for me. I don't know that God is faithful most of all by my own experiences. I know that God is faithful because of the faithfulness of God acted and interpreted in the Word of God. I don't know that God loves me because I feel His love. I know that God loves me

because His Holy Word demonstrates and declares His love. I don't know there is life after death because all civilizations have such a belief. I know there is a heaven to gain because God has revealed that to me in His Word.

- Without this book you do not know God.
- Without this book you do not know His forgiveness and saving grace through Jesus Christ.
- Without this book you do not know your worth as being made in the image of God and your purpose as being the glory of God.
- Without this book you do not know about everlasting life through Jesus's death and resurrection and coming again.
- Without this book you are left in the same fog of speculation and imagination as the rest of the world.

Please understand that God's Word is under constant assault. It began in the Garden when the serpent said, "Did God really say...?" But in the last two hundred years it has been under attack even by those who claim to be Christians. In the 1800's theologians in Europe declared the Bible to be merely man's words about God. Though many stood for the truth in the preceding years I want you to see what has happened in the last century:

- In 1917 Benjamin B. Warfield strenuously and famously stood against liberalism's attack on the Bible as God's Word.
- In 1937 J. Gresham Machen countered neoorthodoxy's encroachment into Princeton Seminary and the Presbyterian church. (Neoorthodoxy taught that the Bible only contained the Word of God, not that it is the Word of God.)
- In 1957 Edward Young in his book *Thy Word is Truth* wrote against those in his day who would weaken the Bible's authority.
- In 1976 Harold Lindsell wrote *The Battle for the*

Bible countering the trend in a leading evangelical seminary and the major protestant denomination in America to dilute the truth of the accuracy and authority of the Bible.

- In 1978-1982 the International Congress on the Bible was convened in an attempt to restate with clarity and conviction the infallibility and authority of the written Word of God.

Without this book you do not know about everlasting life through Jesus's death and resurrection and coming again.

Listen to this clear statement about the Bible as God's Holy Word:

1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself.
2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms, obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises.³

But that did not end the attack on the authority of the Bible. It is with us today in an even more insidious way than ever before. Today it is not the enemies of evangelical belief who challenge the trustworthiness of the Bible it is our friends. Pastors and leaders of some of the largest "evangelical" churches and church movements in our country are once again striking at the very foundation of our faith.

Listen carefully to one very popular evangelical author: "What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archaeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just **a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers of the religious cults that were hugely popular at the time of Jesus**, whose gods had virgin births? But what if as you study the origin of the word 'virgin' you discover that the word 'virgin' in the Gospel of Matthew actually comes from the book of Isaiah, and then you find out that in the Hebrew language at that time, the word 'virgin' could mean several things. And what if you discover that in the first century being 'born of a virgin' referred to a child whose mother became pregnant the first time she had intercourse? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian? Is the way of Jesus still the best way to live? Or does the whole thing fall apart? If the whole faith falls apart when we reexamine and rethink one (doctrine), then it wasn't very strong in the first place, was it?"⁴

This is a very clever attack on the Bible. It is presented as an attack on possible misunderstandings about what the Bible teaches but he ends with the strong suggestion that your faith doesn't need to depend on the reliability of the Bible. And he challenges the very idea of the Scripture being "God-breathed" and the product of the Holy Spirit's work when he says: The virgin birth might be a "bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to religious cults popular at that time." Does he really mean that the Holy Spirit "threw in a bit mythologizing to appeal to popular religious cults" OR does he suggest the Holy Spirit wasn't the divine author of Scripture? Later the author defines "mystery" as the unknowable. He writes, "The Christian faith is mysterious (unknowable) to the core.

It is about things and being that ultimately can't be put into words. Language fails. And if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that very moment made God something God is not.⁵ It is true that we do not know God fully but God has put God into words as He "breathed out" the Scriptures to reveal Himself.

He goes on to suggest that there is more to God than what can be communicated propositionally and therefore revelation is more than proposition. While God certainly is more than what we know Him to be and while we do experience God in non-propositional ways we only know those experiences to be God if the experience (history) is accompanied by propositional revelation from God. Without such propositional truth we don't know if it is God, the devil or gas. God chose to reveal Himself in creation, history and providence but He also chose to interpret that revelation of Himself in words—His Words.

Another hugely popular evangelical author writes about the foundation of Christian faith. When asked if he thinks the Bible is the foundation of the Christian faith, he says not in the way that many Christians think of the Bible:

"Maybe the way (we should think of the Bible) is to loosen up and approach the Bible on less defined terms. Instead of approaching it with our modern assumptions and expectations and aggressive analysis, maybe we need to read it less like scholars and more like humble seekers trying to learn whatever we can from it, in the context of our sincere desire to live for God and do what he wants... Maybe postmodern is postanalytical and postcritical...What if instead of reading the Bible, you let the Bible read you."⁶

Again heresy is so cleverly camouflaged. Of course humility is necessary and of course we must guard against prejudice when we read the Bible and of course God's word shines on

us to reveal who we are but God chose first to reveal Himself to us. And He does so in propositions – words and sentences that make sense and convey truth about Him. We must not reduce the Bible to our subjective response to it. It calls for a response but only a response to truth that God reveals. Oh my friend, if God has SPOKEN, if GOD has spoken, how can we not listen.

We of The Evangelical Free Church of America say it this way:

We believe that God has spoken in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, through the words of human authors. As the verbally inspired Word of God, the Bible is without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority by which every realm of human knowledge and endeavor should be judged. Therefore, it is to be believed in all that it teaches, obeyed in all that it requires and trusted in all that it promises.

The Holy Spirit of God said it this way:

*"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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 3:14-17)

End Notes

- ¹George Eldon Ladd,
http://gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/word_of_God.html
- ² Ibid
- ³ International Congress on the Bible short statement
- ⁴ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, p. 26
- ⁵ Ibid, p. 32
- ⁶ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, p. 56

For Further Study

See George Eldon Ladd on History as Revelation of God
http://gospelpedlar.com/articles/Bible/word_of_God.html

See *The Word Of God* by Michael Bremmer
<http://www.mbrems.com/bible/bible.htm> REVELATION

Chapter Two

Sola Scriptura

"Reformation Sunday" commemorates the day in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Chapel in Germany. But more to the point of this sermon, it was four years later that Luther stood before the bishops of the church and the princes of the government and was interrogated for his teaching and preaching. In that moment, with solemn consideration of the consequences his next words would bring, he declared that his conscience was captive to the Word of God. He said, "I am overcome by the Scripture texts (by which I have been led), and my conscience is bound by God's Word." "My conscience is bound by God's Word."

The Bible alone is the final word in the issue of my relationship with God and stands over every realm of human knowledge and endeavor. What others may say, what church councils may dictate, what can be imagined in the heart of men must all stand under the light of the final arbiter of truth, the Word of God. This alone (the Bible) is God's word to us today. This is how we know God and how we know His will for our lives today and for eternity.

A mere 40 years after Luther's testimony, believers met in the Netherlands and declared: "We believe that these Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe, unto salvation, is sufficiently taught therein."¹ A hundred years later in England the church wrote, "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture..."²

But within 200 years that confidence in the Bible alone began to wane even among some Christians. And by the mid-1900s many Christian leaders were questioning the accuracy and authority of the Bible. Case Western Reserve University sent a questionnaire to 10,000 clergymen in five major U.S. denominations. It received a reply from over 7400 of them. The question asked was this: Do you believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God?" They were not even asked if they believe it is without error; they were simply asked if they believe the Bible to be the Word of God in some unique way.

- 82% of Methodist ministers said "no."
- 89% of Episcopalian ministers said "no."
- 81% of United Presbyterians said "no."
- 57% of Lutherans and Baptists said "no."³

With an affirmation of the Bible as the Word of God slowly slipping from prominence, 200 evangelicals gathered in Chicago in 1978 and again declared their belief: "Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared

***We can function for a season without
God's Word, but can we truly live?***

and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises."⁴

In 2006, our own denomination, the Evangelical Free Church of America, reaffirmed our commitment to the origin and authority of the Bible: "We believe that God has spoken through the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments. They are the verbally inspired Word of God,

without error in the original writings, the complete revelation of His will for salvation, and the ultimate authority that stands over every realm of human knowledge and endeavor. Therefore, the Bible is to be believed in all that it affirms, obeyed in all that it requires, and trusted in all that it promises.”⁵

What does all of this mean to you? Oh, I realize full well that it is entirely possible to go through many days of life with nary a thought of God. We don’t sense any need for the Bible in order to set our alarm clock, make our coffee, drive our car to work or school, manage our business throughout the day or determine how we will use our free time. There doesn’t seem to be any obvious or compelling reason to search the Scriptures to make decisions about which job to take, which house or car to buy, which school to attend, who to date or marry, or which vacation to take. One man wrote, “Life today on the outside is polished and orderly, like the fadeless nylon, super-smooth plastic, medicated, antiseptic, expedited and wall-to-wall carpet world we move around in, but on the inside it is broken, confused, hellish, anguished, lying in pieces and crying its eyes out.”⁶

Yes, we can function for a season without God’s Word, but can we truly live? I’m not talking about those who deny God altogether; I’m talking about us. You believe in God. How do you know him?

- Does God love you?
- Is God truly sovereign over the affairs of this world and your life?
- Is He in control of what’s happening or are you on your own?

You believe in God the Son, Jesus. Why?

- Does He love you and did He die for you?

- Do you believe He forgives your sins?
- Do you believe there is a hell to avoid and a heaven to gain?

You believe in the Holy Spirit. Really?

- Do you believe the Spirit lives in you and guides you?
- Do you believe God has anything to say about how we live our lives for His glory and our good?

If you believe any of those things, how do you know them to be true? In your most serious moments when you reach out to God, how do you know He is there? In your pleading prayers, how do you know He hears? Since the dawn of civilization, men and women have believed there is a god out there. Life itself, the world on which we live, and the universe around it, demand an explanation. And the explanation given throughout human history has been God. A recent issue of TIME magazine indicates that less than 5% of Americans believe the material universe is all there is.⁷ All humanity is, as Thomas Edison said it, "incurably religious" and, nearly all have some idea of God at the center of their religion.

How can I be certain that this Bible is in fact God's word to us?

But how do we know Him? The very presence of life and the universe around us only tell us that God is there and that he must be very powerful. (See Romans 1:18-20) But for most of human history, that knowledge has not brought comfort but only fear to the hearts of people. And nearly every religion is an attempt to placate a god they don't even know. Yes, the heavens declare the presence, power and even glory of God (See Psalm 19:1) but they don't let me hear from Him.

Has **God** spoken? Can I hear from Him? If the answer is yes, do you realize again the implications? If GOD has spoken, if God HAS SPOKEN, how can we not listen! This Bible claims to be that WORD OF GOD to us! I didn't say the Bible claims to be the Bible. I said the Bible claims to be the WORD OF GOD—God's written revelation of Himself to us. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*"

When we say "God-breathed, inspired," we don't mean as with Handel when he wrote "The Messiah" or Martin Luther King when he delivered his "I have a Dream" speech. We mean that God breathed out His very own words to us by His Spirit superintending the human authors. 2 Peter 1:21 states, "*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.*" 413 times in the Old Testament it declares, "Thus **said the Lord**" or in more modern English, "The LORD SAYS!" The New Testament writers, including the Apostles Paul and Peter, declared: "*I have become (the church's) servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness.*"(Col. 1:25) and "*When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God...*"(1 Thessalonians 2:13) Or in 1 Peter 1:23, "*For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*"

But that begs the question I want to address: How can I be certain that this Bible is in fact God's word to us? Earlier I said the Bible claims to be the Word of God. I quickly realize that just because a book claims to be from God doesn't make it necessarily so. Many books claim divine origin. Did not Mohammad claim divine origin for the

Quran? Did not Joseph Smith claim the same for The Book of Mormon? I also realize that I can't use the Word of God to prove the Word of God—that is a circular argument. It would be saying I believe the Bible is the Word of God because it claims to be and I believe the Bible because the Bible is the Word of God. For most of us that kind of thinking doesn't satisfy.

Instead, I am asking you, you who are Christians, especially you who love the Word of God, to do something you have a hard time doing. I'm asking you to think of the Bible not as a holy book, as the Word of God, but to think of it merely as a book. Now I want you to put that mere human book on the shelf with the works of Flavius Josephus, the first century historian who wrote extensively about Judaism and the history surrounding it. I want you to put it next to Julius Caesar's Commentaries on War written just a little earlier than Josephus. These books are nearly contemporary with the New Testament books.

Next I want you to apply the same tests of authenticity and accuracy to all three works—Josephus', Caesar's and to those books of Moses, David, Nehemiah, John, Peter and Paul, books of the Old and New Testaments. The question being answered is this: Are these books reliable and trustworthy documents of actual history? Three tests are often applied to works of antiquity:

First of all do they claim to be true to history? If they make no claim to historical accuracy or if they in fact admit to being fiction, there is no point in testing them for authenticity and accuracy. Secondly, is there internal evidence in each one to reasonably assume each is an accurate representation of what happened?

- If we could demonstrate that any one of them is filled with errors of historical fact,

- If we could demonstrate that any one of them is filled with self-contradictions,
- If we had multiple copies of any one of them that disagreed with each other in significant ways, we could seriously question the accuracy of the book.

But in fact the history of the books of the Old and New Testaments stands up to every test of accuracy and authenticity better than any other work of antiquity. Not one reference to geography, history, or people of the Bible has ever been demonstrated to be inaccurate. More importantly most of the charges of inaccuracy in the Bible have been proven to be false charges, charges based on insufficient archeological or historical information. As historians and archeologists continue to discover more and more, they continue to corroborate the accuracy of the books of the Bible.

Thirdly, can we be reasonably certain that the copies we read today are what were actually written by the authors 2000 or more years ago? Consider this: for no other document from antiquity do we have as much confirmation that we are reading what was originally written as we do of the books of the Bible. Few people question that we have an accurate representation of what Plato wrote or of what Sophocles wrote. And yet we have no copies of Plato's work closer than 1300 years after he wrote it. And the same is true for most of the works of antiquity which most people take at face value as true. But we have many copies of the books of the Old Testament that date back to before the time of Jesus. And we have even more copies of the New Testament books that date back to within 100 years of their being written. Frederic Kenyon, former director and principal librarian of the British Museum wrote, "Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."⁸

Now please remember, we are not thinking of the Bible as the Word of God but simply as an ancient book of history, philosophy and song. When we do that, does the Bible meet the tests of authenticity, integrity and accuracy? The answer is a resounding “yes,” in fact it is able to meet those tests better than any other book from the ancient past. We can reasonably conclude that what these books claim happened did indeed happen.

The next logical question is, “Do these reliable historical documents give sufficient reason to believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be?” You believe that Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan lived, not because some divine book says so but because reliable historical documents make the case for their existence.

- These Old Testament and New Testament documents present Jesus as God the Son in human flesh.
- They claim He fulfilled ancient prophecies.
- They claim He performed miracles.
- They claim He died and rose again substantiating His claim to being God.

Now, unless you determine ahead of time that miracles can't happen and that resurrection is impossible, the evidence of these otherwise authentic, reliable and accurate books is that Jesus is who He claimed to be. These historically reliable books claim that Jesus is God.

The next logical step is easy. If Jesus is who He claimed to be (God in human flesh) then He is an infallible authority—what He says we can believe. I like to say it this way: since Jesus demonstrated that He is God by His life, death and resurrection, I would be a fool of the highest order to not believe Him. Jesus is the ultimate authority and to be believed.

The next logical step is equally easy: Jesus, with His unique and infallible authority says that these books of the Bible are in fact the very Word of God. Throughout the New Testament Jesus claims divine authority for the Bible. He treats it and quotes it as God's Word to humanity. That Word is the final appeal He makes to clinch His arguments. The point is that if the resurrected, ultimate authority, Jesus says this is the Word of God, it must be true! Many years ago Martin Kahler summarized this argument well: "We do not believe in Christ because we believe in the Bible, but we believe in the Bible because we believe in Christ."⁹

Does the Bible meet the tests of authenticity, integrity and accuracy? The answer is a resounding "yes."

The fifth step is this: If these books of the Bible are the Word of God, as Jesus says, then they must, by definition, be entirely trustworthy—after all they are God's Word. And the conclusion is that because of the authoritative, infallible testimony of Jesus, we believe that the Bible is the Word of God.

Now, if I didn't lose you "in the weeds," you can understand that this is not circular reasoning. We started not by saying the Bible is the Word of God, but by simply saying the Bible is an historical document. Based on that reliable historical document we can reasonable conclude who Jesus is. Understanding and believing who Jesus is, we can trust Him. He says the Bible is God's Word. That is how I know that the Bible is the Word of God and I can trust my life and eternity to its truth.

For those who believe otherwise, it is logically inconsistent to call the Bible “the good book” and not believe it is the very Word of God to us. The authors of the Bible books clearly thought of themselves as God’s instruments to reveal God’s words to humanity. So if the Bible is not God’s Word then they were either the most deceived or the most evil of authors – and the Bible could not be a “good” book. That’s partly why we can’t be sanguine about other books and authors who claim to be speaking for God—either they are or they aren’t, and if they aren’t they are either deceived or evil.

But again what can we reasonably conclude? Timothy 3:16 says, *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."* And, 2 Peter 1:21 says, *"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."* Earlier I asked, “Has God spoken? Can I hear from Him?” If the answer is yes, do you realize again the implications? If GOD has spoken, if God HAS SPOKEN, how can we not listen! I cannot say it more strongly than to say your life depends on this book! Hear Moses: *"Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life."* (Deuteronomy 32:46-47)

Listen to the Psalmist: *"They (God's Words) are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb."* (Psalm 19:10)

Hear Jesus in Matthew 4:4: *"Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

God's Word; hear it, read it if you can read and listen to it if you can't, study it, and hear it taught and preached. Talk about it with those who, like you, care what it says. Demand that your teachers teach the Bible, demand that your preachers preach the Bible. When people come to church they don't need to hear from Bill Gates, Dr. Phil or Stephen Spielberg (or Oprah), they need to hear from God. I implore leaders and Small Group leaders—don't spend much of your precious time together with the people in good books about everything else under the sun; spend that precious time in the Word of God—because it is God's Word to us. Apart from what God has said in His Word, the teacher or preacher has nothing to say that couldn't probably be said by countless others and probably said better.

The authors of the Bible books clearly thought of themselves as God's instruments to reveal God's words to humanity

We read of the Old Testament preachers in Ezra, "*Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.*"(7:10) And it was Nehemiah who wrote, the preachers "*read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.*"(Nehemiah 8:8) Of Jesus we read that he "*stood up to read the scroll of the prophet Isaiah... Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began*" to teach them. (Luke 4:16) May that be us in our public and private meetings!

Over one hundred years ago, Benjamin Warfield, the principal of the then evangelical Princeton Seminary said it well:

"Let it suffice to say that to an (absolutely fully) inspired Bible, humbly trusted as such, we actually, and as a matter of fact, owe all that has blessed our lives with hopes of immortality (with God), and with the present (fruit) of the love of God in Christ. This is not an exaggeration...(Never) let us forget that, in point of fact, it is to the Bible that we owe it that we know Christ and are found in him...We must not at any rate forget those nineteen Christian centuries which stretch between Christ and us...Even with the Bible, and all that had come from the Bible to form Christian lives and inform a Christian literature, after a millennium and a half the darkness had grown so deep that a Reformation was necessary if Christian truth was to persist—a Luther was necessary, raised up by God to rediscover the Bible and give it back to man. Suppose there had been no Bible for Luther to rediscover—and no Bible in the hearts of God's saints and in the pages of Christian literature, persisting through those darker ages to prepare a Luther to rediscover it? Though Christ had come into the world and had lived and died for us, might it not be to us...as though he had not been? Or, if some faint echo of a Son of God offering salvation to men could still be faintly heard...who could assure our doubting souls that it was not all a pleasant dream? Whatever might possibly have been had there been no Bible, it is actually to the Bible that you and I owe it that we have a Christ, a Christ to love, to trust and to follow, a Christ (of history) who is the ground of our salvation, a Christ within us, the hope of glory."¹⁰

Two hundred years ago John Burton Sr. (1803) wrote a hymn that we still sing today—a hymn that captures our hearts' love for the Bible because it is God's very word to us.

Holy Bible, book divine,
Precious treasure, thou art mine;
Mine to tell me whence I came;
Mine to teach me what I am;

Mine to chide me when I rove;
Mine to show a Saviour's love;
Mine thou art to guide and guard;
Mine to punish or reward;

Mine to comfort in distress,
Suffering in this wilderness;
Mine to show by living faith,
Man can triumph over death;

Mine to tell of joys to come,
And the rebel sinner's doom;
O thou holy book divine,
Precious treasure, thou art mine.¹¹

End Notes

- ¹ 1561 Belgic Confession, Article 7
- ² 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1, VI
- ³ James Boice, *Does Inerrancy Matter* (ICBI Foundation Series 1), 1979
- ⁴ 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy
- ⁵ 2006 EFCA Draft 2 Statement of Faith
- ⁶ John Killinger, *The Centrality of Preaching In the Total Task of the Ministry*, 1969, 25
- ⁷ October 23, 2006
- ⁸ Irwin Lutzer, *You Can Trust the Bible*, p. 77
- ⁹ R.C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone*, p. 86
- ¹⁰ B.B. Warfield, *The Church Doctrine of Inspiration*
- ¹¹ Original *Trinity Hymnal*, #674

Chapter Three

Does God Speak Today? Part 1 2 Peter 1:12-21

About five years ago a forty-five-year-old, twenty-year member of our church came to me and said, "I recently had a dream about you that I have not wanted to tell you. But God kept telling me I had to." That far in that conversation I heard one thing: Somehow this person understood the dream to be from God.

The person continued. "In my dream I saw you at your desk here at the church. The hard part is that you were slumped over from a heart attack. I don't know what it means, I don't know if you were dead; I just know I had to tell you." At that point in the conversation I also knew that this person believed they were commissioned **by** God to speak to me **for** God.

If you had been me, what would you have said? I suspect I stood there with a blank look on my face but several unedifying thoughts raced through my mind.

Jon Haley, one of our staff missionaries, told me that several years ago he was sitting next to a man on an airplane who toward the end of their flight turned to Jon and said, "God told me to give this to you." At that he handed Jon a \$100 bill. God has always liked Jon better than me!

While the examples may be somewhat egregious, the root experience is all-too common even in evangelical circles today. It seems an increasing number of Christians are experiencing and even expecting God to speak to them.

And when they say that, they aren't saying they hear a voice or see a vision but they do mean that they expect God to directly reveal to them through thoughts, dreams or impressions what they and even others are to do in certain situations.

In Charismatic circles they speak of it quiet boldly. In our circles the language is muted but the expectation seems the same. This idea of God revealing Himself to us, not only through Scripture, but directly has crept into our music and into the way we talk about our relationship with God:

- "Lord, speak to me."
- "We wait upon the Lord."
- "We listen for the 'still small voice' of God."
- "We say we heard from God"
- "The Lord said to me" or
- "The Lord told me to say or do such and such."

But when we sing or talk like that, what do we mean and what are we expecting?

In 2 Peter the author deals with knowing who speaks for God.

2 Peter 1:12-21 says, *"So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I*

love; with him I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 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."

In verses 12-15 of our text, Peter begins by saying that he realizes they have heard these things before and that they are rather mature in their faith, but he wants to remind them of these truths anyway. Furthermore he says, I won't be around much longer and I want to do everything I can to ensure that you will remember these fundamental truths.

Then Peter moves on to the more specific reason for writing his letter. He says, "*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...*" (2 Peter 1:16) As will be clearer in chapter 2, false teachers were causing problems in the churches and Peter is responding. But already here, he indicates that Peter's and the other Apostles' teaching was being characterized as "cleverly invented stories." Again the issue is who speaks for God?

Beginning in chapter 3 it becomes more obvious, but even here we see that the specific teaching that was coming under attack by the false teachers was the issue of Christ's 2nd coming. If Jesus is not coming again it undermines the entire gospel. The good news is that God is in the process of recreating His creation; that sin, injustice, fear, and death are not the end. God will bring the great change to

completion—Jesus will come again and usher in the fulfillment of the age to come—resurrected bodies, a new heaven and earth.

No, Peter says, our teachings were not “cleverly invented stories”; they were not fraudulent, deceitful, quackery. Two things confirm what we have told you about the coming of Jesus:

1. In verse 16 he says, *“we were eyewitness of his majesty”*; we saw Jesus in His transfigured, glorious, state; we saw Him as He will be when He comes again.
2. And secondly, in verse 19, *“we have the word of the prophets made more certain”*; we have the completely reliable “word of the prophets.”

***God allowed Peter to see Jesus as
He is without the encumbrance of His
human nature.***

In the first of those, Peter says you should believe us because we are eye and ear witnesses of an actual historical event that corroborates who Jesus truly is. And what Peter proceeds to do is remind them in few words of the Transfiguration of Jesus. 2 Peter 1:17-18 says, *“For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”*

My guess is that at least some of you are like me in that you've never thought much of the Transfiguration of Jesus. But here in 2 Peter, Peter connects the Transfiguration to the 2nd coming. And, in a minute, when we look at where

the Gospel writers place the event in their retelling of it, we see they too connect it to the Second Coming.

To better understand this we need to revisit the event. Matthew 17:1-9 says, *"After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.' While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!' When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. 'Get up,' he said. 'Don't be afraid.' When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, 'Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.'"*

In that experience God allowed Peter to see Jesus as He is without the encumbrance of His human nature. Peter and the others saw Jesus in His glorious majesty. And the point is, it is this glory in which He will return. He may have come the first time taking on the vulnerability and weakness of a human baby but when He comes again it will be as majestic King of kings and Lord of lords. Peter says I've seen what He will be like. As I said earlier, the Gospel writers also seem to connect this Transfiguration of Jesus with His 2nd coming. In all three accounts (Matthew, Mark and Luke) the Transfiguration event is told immediately after Jesus speaks of His 2nd coming. Peter would never forget that experience on the mountain and he speaks of it

to confirm for his readers that he and other Apostles are the ones who have actually seen and heard from God.

But as we have already seen, there is a second reason why Peter says he, rather than the false teachers, speaks for God. Look at 2 Peter 1:19-21: *"And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 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."*

Most scholars recognize that the phrase, "word of the prophets" is synonymous with the Holy Scriptures. But what does he mean that the Scriptures are "made more certain." Does this mean that the experience of the Apostles authenticates the Scriptures? That's the way it looks in the NIV translation.

But I propose that exactly the opposite is what Peter is saying. I don't often point out what I think are less than the best translations of a Greek text, but it is worth noting that the word "made" is not in the Greek. The English Standard Version and the alternate translation in the New American Standard Bible make better sense of the wording: ESV – "And we have something more sure, the prophetic word"

NASB – "We have the more sure prophetic word"

Now the idea makes sense: It's as if Peter said, "If you don't accept our experience then go to the more certain Scriptures." Experience, even the most unusual and most spiritual experience, doesn't validate Scripture, but

Scripture validates or invalidates our experience. I'm getting ahead of myself but the only words from God that I can know **with certainty** are His are those spoken through the Scriptures.

It is hard to overemphasize the Apostles' regard for the Scripture. Whenever the Apostles wanted to authenticate their witness to an experience they went to the Old Testament. Jesus Himself didn't appeal to experience but to the Word. On the road to Emmaus He showed them Himself from the Scriptures. All the way through the books of Acts, Romans and Hebrews, the authors' final appeal time and time again is to Scripture.

I recall many years ago Billy Graham was asked on a morning talk show, "How do you know Jesus is alive?" He responded, "Because I talked to him this morning." With all due respect to Dr. Graham, and with an understanding of what he meant, I would still say we don't know that Jesus is alive because we talked to Him this morning; we know He's alive because the Word of God says so.

I don't know that God is faithful most of all by my own experiences. I know that God is faithful because of the faithfulness of God demonstrated and interpreted by God in the Word of God.

I don't know that God loves me because I feel His love. I know God loves me because His Holy Word demonstrates and declares His love. Where I'm headed with this is toward an understanding of the sufficiency of the Bible. Many Christians believe in the authority of God's Word but they don't believe in the sufficiency of it. Many want an additional "word" from God, when God says He has already given His Word.

Peter concludes his remarks with verses 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.*" Peter is saying the words of Scripture are exactly what God said.

We now go back to where I began:

Who speaks for God? Who can say, "God said..." or "God told me..."? Peter says the Word of God, the Bible, is the voice of God. Paul says the same even more descriptively. "*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) What is the Scripture useful for? Knowing how to live godly lives. And how sufficient is the Scripture? "That the man (or woman) of God may be *partially* equipped? No—that they may be "thoroughly equipped" for every good work.

So what about this idea of, apart from Scripture, listening for God, hearing from God, and "The Lord told me..."? Does God speak today? If the answer to that question is "yes" then the answer demands explanation. When we say, "God speaks today" we must be referring to either the doctrine of "Illumination" or the doctrine of "Revelation."

Illumination

Illumination is the act of God's Spirit whereby He enables us to understand and apply the Scriptures to our thoughts and actions.

1 Corinthians 2:11-14 says, "*No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us...The man*

without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (understood)."

Theologian J.I. Packer defines illumination well: "It is not a giving of new revelation, but a work within us that enables us to grasp and to love the revelation that is there before us in the biblical text as heard and read... Sin in our mental and moral system clouds our minds and wills so that we miss and resist the force of Scripture...The Spirit, however, opens and unveils our minds and attunes our hearts so that we understand."¹

Peter is saying the words of Scripture are exactly what God said.

It is in this sense that hymn writers and preachers of the past spoke of hearing from God. The Scripture was the Word of God and the Holy Spirit enabled them to truly "hear" meaning "understand" its significance to their lives.

Revelation

Revelation, however, is a different issue. Revelation is not just a matter of understanding God's Word but is in fact the very Word of God—God speaking. Catholics and Mormons, among many others, believe God has revealed Himself authoritatively in ways other than the Bible and creation. Catholics believe that God speaks through church tradition and also when the Pope speaks ex cathedra. Latter Day Saints believe that God spoke through the Prophet Joseph Smith as recorded in the book of Mormon. Most Protestants and more specifically Evangelicals roundly reject those ideas. For reasons I have neither the time nor the qualification to explain, Evangelicals have always

maintained that special revelation, Scripture, the Word of God, ended with the book of Revelation.

So, if revelation ceased with Scripture then what is this "word from God" or "The Lord told me..." that we hear about today? Do they truly mean that God directly revealed something to them that is not in the Scriptures? What's interesting to me is that most Evangelicals who believe they hear from God directly today will readily say that they aren't always certain they have it right. How can we know?

But when I go to the Scripture I find no such hesitations or evasions. The prophets boldly declared, "Thus saith the Lord!" And they knew that the test of a prophet was 100% accuracy. Anything less was punishable by death because they dared to speak for God when God had not spoken. When God spoke it was always accurate!

Wisdom is not information but "wisdom" is the Scripture-saturated and Holy Spirit-enabled ability to apply information.

Philip Jensen and Tony Payne in their good book, *Guidance and the Voice of God*, write of the tendency of many Christians to try to find out directly from God exactly what it is they are to do in a given situation. We want to know who we should marry, where we should live, whether this house is the right one, whether we should be a missionary, and so on. But Jensen and Payne accurately assess the situation by saying we are often asking the wrong questions: "The point is this: if we ask the wrong question, we either get the wrong answer or no answer at all. And if we get no answer, we are tempted to turn elsewhere to find an answer. Many of our problems with guidance stem from precisely this: we ask the wrong questions, and then

wonder why we cannot find answers...(For example) we are terribly concerned about choosing between Druscilla and Mary-Lou. We think the success of our whole married life will depend on the right choice, and we agonize over it. However, God's priority is for us to be godly, whether we are single or married, and whether we marry Druscilla or Mary-Lou.”²

Information versus Wisdom

But what we most often seek is information from God – we want “the” answer, when God promises wisdom. Wisdom is not information but “wisdom” is the Scripture-saturated and Holy Spirit-enabled ability to apply information. Let me say that again: wisdom is the Scripture-saturated and Holy Spirit-enabled ability to apply information. James 1:2-5 says, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”*

When a person is facing a trial, a most difficult experience, isn't that when they most want information? But what does God promise? Does He promise special revelation given just to us as a Word from the Lord? No! He promises “wisdom”—the principles of godliness laid out in His word by which we may move in the right direction. For example, I don't think God is going to tell us which car to purchase. He does tell us in His Word about stewardship and motives. But, someone cries, how do I know what God wants me to do? Hear me carefully: seek to live by the principles of God's Word and for God's glory and do as you please!

"But what if I'm wrong?" someone says. First of all you probably won't be wrong unless you persist in thinking there is only one right job or one right man or one right car and you have to find it. Secondly, if it is important to God and you have taken a wrong direction, do you think God rubs His hands in glee that He tricked you into making a mistake or do you think He loves you enough to show you? Theologian Wayne Grudem wrote, "People who continually seek subjective "messages" from God to guide their lives must be cautioned that subjective personal guidance is not a primary function of New Testament prophecy. They need to place much more emphasis on Scripture and seeking God's sure wisdom written there."

Can God still offer special insight into our own lives today? Of course, but that is the exception and not the rule.

Then Grudem cites several charismatic writers who agree with this caution:

- Michael Harper says, "Prophecies which tell other people what they are to do—are to be regarded with great suspicion."
- Donald Gee wrote, "Many of our errors where spiritual gifts are concerned arise when we want the extraordinary and exceptional to be made frequent and habitual. Let all who develop excessive desire for 'messages' through the gifts take warning from the wreckage of past generations as well as of contemporaries...The Holy Scriptures are a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path."
- Donald Bridge states, "The illuminist constantly finds that 'God tells him' to do things...They are treading a dangerous path. Their ancestors have trodden it before, and always with disastrous results

in the long run. Inner feelings and special promptings are by their very nature subjective. The Bible provides our objective guide.”³

Can God still offer special insight into our own lives today? Of course, but that is the exception and not the rule. (See *Does God Speak Today? Part 2* for more on this concept) It would be far better if God’s people understood the biblical doctrine of illumination and **depended** on the Spirit of God to guide us into godliness through His written Word, which is what He promises! (For exceptions, see *Does God Speak Today? Part 2*) Instead of saying, “The Lord told me to...” what if we said “It seems to me that it would be consistent with what God says in His Word if I were to...”

Who speaks for God? Read again from 2 Peter and 2 Timothy: “*And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention...Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*”(1:19-21)

“*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)

End Notes

¹ J.I. Packer, *Illumination, The Holy Spirit Gives Spiritual Understanding*.

² Greg Gilbert’s review of Dallas Willard’s *Hearing God*, p. 85-86

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1058-9

Chapter Four

Does God Speak Today? Part 2 2 Peter 1:16-21

In the preceding chapter 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.

In our text, Peter was answering the question of who speaks for God. *"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."* (2 Peter 1:20-21)

Earlier I made strong statements about the sufficiency of Scripture for knowing the will of God today. As 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, *"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 believe in the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. But I also understand that God can and does guide or speak today.

When talking about hearing from God, I have very real concerns. 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 when people 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.

I want 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 I also know many believe God "leads" them outside the written Word of God. So I want to address two issues in this sermon: first I want to talk about those "impressions," "nudges," "ideas," "leadings," or "words" from the Lord that occasionally occur in our lives. And secondly, I want to talk about how God normally guides us in our lives.

The text says it was the Spirit. Here apparently the Spirit prompted these disciples to say something.

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 also very noteworthy is that he didn't heed their advice; he went on to Jerusalem. One conclusion I can draw is that Paul didn't place that experience, 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 says 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.*"

I can't properly narrow my definition of "revelation" to only the inscripturated Word of God. But, as New Testament

theologian Don Carson put it, there is something between “objective Scripture (and) uncontrolled mysticism.”¹ 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 New Testament believers apart from the Scripture.

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? And, is the “impression” or “sense” I have from God for just me or for the church at large? 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.

First he says, “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.”² 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.

Secondly, Packer says, "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

Scripture itself speaks of God revealing something to New Testament believers apart from the Scripture.

and of their call and fitness to lead others, should be dismissed out of hand."³ 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.

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...”⁴

But given those warnings, we still have biblical examples of those who have been led by the Lord apart from a specific 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,” Paul and Silas were communicated with by the Spirit of God and kept from going.⁵

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 tells 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 what they perceive is 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.

How do we test such "impressions?"
First, if they are contrary to Scripture we know they are wrong.

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 New Testament, 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? 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, nudges, or feelings, we get from heaven, in the present, 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 an

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.

Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "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 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.

Thirdly, God's guidance comes through a Renewed Mind.

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, "*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.*" (1:9-11) "Discern" here is the same word as "test and approve" in Rom 12:2.

And, in Romans 12:1-2, Paul says, "*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.*"

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.

God doesn't want us just to make right choices; He wants us to be the kind of *person* who makes right choices. 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.⁶ You just act out of who you are.

Matthew 12:34-35 says, "*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

***Does God speak today? Oh, yes He does!
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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** (emphasis added). 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.⁷ More briefly said, "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: "*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements...*" (Acts 15:28) 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."⁸

This is not less spiritual or less personal. God is involved in every part of what He calls us to. Ephesians 4:13-15 says, "*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.

End Notes

¹ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 162

² "True Guidance" by J.I. Packer

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ John Piper, sermon from August 22, 2004

⁷ Ibid

⁸ J.I. Packer "The Ministry of the Spirit in Discerning the Will of God."

Chapter Five

Further Study Notes and Essays on Hearing from God and God's Word

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I. From the Cambridge Declaration Of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals

(A current statement of faith)

We reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured.

We deny that any creed, council or individual may bind a Christian's conscience, that the Holy Spirit speaks independently or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation.

II. "The Guidance of the Holy Spirit," in Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 1: *The Claims of Truth* Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976:

"We must rely upon the Holy Spirit to direct and guide us in the understanding and application of God's will as revealed in Scripture, and we must be constantly conscious of our need of the Holy Spirit to apply the Word effectively to us in each situation. The function of the Holy Spirit in such matters is that of illumination as to what the will of the Lord is, and of imparting to us the willingness and strength to do that will. . . As we are the subjects of this illumination and are responsive to it, and as the Holy Spirit is operative in us to the doing of God's will, we shall have feelings, impressions, convictions, urges, inhibitions, impulses, burdens, resolutions. Illumination and direction by the Spirit through the Word of God will focus themselves in our consciousness in these ways. . . It is here, however, that careful distinction is necessary. The moment we desire or expect or think that a state of our consciousness is the effect of a direct intimation to us of the Holy Spirit's will, or

consists in such an intimation and is therefore in the category of special direction from him, then we have given way to the notion of special, direct, detached communication from the Holy Spirit. And this, in respect of its nature, belongs to the same category as belief in special revelation. The only way whereby we can avoid this error is to maintain that the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit is through the means which he has provided, and that his work is to enable us rightly to interpret and apply the Scripture in the various situations of life, and to enable us to, interpret all the factors which enter into each situation in the light of Scripture. (pp. 188-89)

Page 790 of Nov 11, 1883 sermon by Spurgeon

"We often meet with a fanciful religion in which people trust to impulses, to dreams, to noises and mystic things which they imagine they have seen— all of it is fiddle-faddle! And yet they are quite wrapped up in it. I pray that you may cast out this chaffy stuff—there is no food for the spirit in it. The life of my soul lies not in what I think, or what I fancy, or what I imagine, or what I enjoy of fine feeling, but only in that which faith apprehends to be the Word of God!"

III. Does God Speak Today From the Bible?[©]

R. Fowler White

http://www.the-highway.com/God_Speak.html

(The underlined and bold emphases are by Jerry Nelson.) Evangelical Protestant faith has always affirmed, as a central tenet of its understanding of divine revelation, that the Word of God must have supreme authority in religion. Evangelicalism has historically held this view in close conjunction with the work of the Holy Spirit. The truth can be stated this way:

The living and true God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is supreme head of a living church, is not mute. He speaks—and He speaks clearly—by His Spirit and through His written word, the Bible.¹

Therefore, as the author of Hebrews aptly puts it, we must see to it that we do not disregard "Him who *is* speaking" (Heb. 12:25)² These statements are among the claims that define those who have traditionally identified themselves as evangelicals. They are my own affirmations as an evangelical theologian. They are, further, the affirmations of the contributors to this present volume of essays. Certain evangelicals, however, have begun to add an additional proposition. It is extremely important that we understand this additional proposition and the effect it is having on present evangelical thought and practice. A crisis is on the horizon, and those who are unaware may well be caught off guard.

This new proposition states that God also speaks to His people today *apart* from the Bible, though He never speaks in contradiction to it. As qualified as this statement seems to be, few evangelicals today would question whether it is true. After all, if nothing that God may say today apart from the Scriptures actually *contradicts* what He has already said in the Scriptures, **what is the big deal? Simply put, the big deal is whether or not it is actually true that God speaks to His people apart from the Bible. Is this new affirmation itself a contradiction of the Scriptures? Has God, in fact, told His people in the Bible that they should hear His voice in both spoken and written words? Does not this new view threaten to set aside the historic doctrine of the sufficiency and finality of Scripture?**

Lest anyone be prematurely self-assured of having the right answers to these questions, consider the issue from another point of view. If we deny that God speaks today apart from the Scriptures, are we quenching His Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19)? Some, such as William DeArteaga, have said exactly that.³ Others state the matter in an even more serious way. Jack Deere, a former Dallas Theological Seminary professor, now conference speaker, author, and Presbyterian (PCUSA) pastor, has made the following assertions:

In order to fulfill God's highest purposes for our lives we must be able to hear his voice both in the written word and in the word freshly spoken from heaven. . . Satan understands the strategic importance of Christians hearing God's voice so he has launched various attacks against us in this area. One of his most successful attacks has been to develop a doctrine that teaches God no longer speaks to us except through the written word. Ultimately, this doctrine is demonic even [though] Christian theologians have been used to perfect it.⁴

Shocking words for sure, but arresting, aren't they? We need a good deal of candor if we are to fully appreciate what is being said here. If DeArteaga, Deere, and others of similar mind are right, if the Bible does indeed teach the church to hear God's voice both through its pages and apart from them in words "freshly spoken from heaven," then the contributors to this present volume and those who agree with them are at least guilty of quenching the Spirit, if not of outright refusal to hear the very voice of God. We, of all people, are especially in need of fanning into flame those gifts of the Spirit through which God would speak to His church today (cf. 2 Tim. 1:6).

With this fuller appreciation for what is at stake, I will evaluate certain key arguments that have led others to affirm that God still speaks today apart from the Bible. In the past we might have turned to Pentecostal and charismatic teachers for such argumentation, since this affirmation has been a defining trait and *modus operandi* of their circles. But in recent years a whole new wave of evangelicalism has arisen among teachers from historically non-Pentecostal and noncharismatic circles. These teachers and authors have been at the forefront of the whole discussion regarding the hearing of God's voice. Because of this new group of influential teachers, we will focus our particular attention on the arguments advanced by them, principally Wayne Grudem and Jack Deere. Though this may mean that I must entertain some views unique to Grudem and Deere, it is nevertheless my aim to take into account what is distinctive to *all* who affirm the doctrine that God speaks today apart from the Bible.⁵

DEFINING OUR TERMS

We need to ask ourselves, first, what does it mean to say that "God speaks today"? Keeping in mind the traditional meaning that "God speaks today through the Bible," the phrase has come to be used in two other senses. For some, the words "God speaks today" are simply a popular, if misleading, way of describing the fact that God guides and directs His people by His Spirit in the application of His written word through promptings, impressions, insights, and the like. Most non-Pentecostals and noncharismatics have explained these (more or less) intuitive experiences in terms of the Spirit's works of illumination, leading, and conviction. A few would even acknowledge that, among those who fit a given psycho-spiritual profile, these experiences might be accompanied by things seen or heard. All of these experiences are, however, carefully distinguished from the Spirit's work of revelation.⁶ Hence,

though the Spirit's illumination and guidance may sometimes focus on phenomena such as promptings or impressions, those phenomena are not specifically interpreted as involving the biblical ministry-gifts of revelation, such as prophecy and tongues or their correlates (e.g., visions, dreams, auditions).

Others, of course, use the words "God speaks today" to mean that He guides and directs His people by giving them words of direction through all the same media that the Bible portrays Him as using in the past (e.g., visions and auditions, prophets and angels). As Deere says, "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."⁷ We find the evidence for this claim, Deere argues, in the various methods God has used in the past to speak to His people.

For example, during the age of the Old Testament, Deere observes, "God spoke to his children ... in an audible voice, in dreams and visions, through circumstances and fleeces, through inner impressions, through prophets, through angels and through Scripture."⁸ Turning to the Gospels, Deere notes that `one of the basic keys to the ministry of Jesus was that he only did what he saw his Father doing and he only spoke the words that his Father gave him to speak.'⁹ According to Deere, the same pattern can be seen in Acts: "Special guidance [was] given to the apostles and others by visions, angelic voices, the Holy Spirit, etc."¹⁰ Finally, in the New Testament epistles, Paul instructs the churches concerning their use of the revelatory gifts of "prophecy, tongues, words of wisdom, words of knowledge, and discernment of Spirits [sic]."¹¹ Moreover, as Deere understands it, the author of Hebrews expresses his belief that angelic visitations were possible in his day when he

reminded his readers that "some have entertained angels unawares" (13:2 KJV).¹² By contrast, then, with the previous definition of the phrase "God speaks today," Deere concludes that "on a *prima facie* reading of the Scriptures, one would expect God to continue communicating to his children throughout the church age with the same variety of methods he has always used."¹³

WORDS SO BROADLY DEFINED

Let's admit it: the idea that God continues to communicate with us using exactly the same methods that He has always used is not only provocative but has a certain attraction. Making it all the more interesting, Deere's contention that the issue of whether God speaks today apart from the Bible is basically a matter of recognizing that God uses the same means to communicate today as He used in the past.¹⁴

As we ponder this claim, let us not make the mistake of saying that God has never spoken apart from Scripture, for indeed He has done just that. For example, though Moses had committed to writing the words God spoke to him, God continued to speak apart from those Scriptures through the prophets who came after Moses. Having elicited this acknowledgment from us, however, **Deere wants us to take an additional step: he urges that, as God has done in the past, so we should expect Him to do in the present.**

As noble as Deere's conclusion may sound, it is a seriously deficient theological view precisely because it does not respect the biblical link between the means through which God spoke and the content He conveyed through those means, namely, His very *words*. In this light we must observe that, despite his intentions to the contrary, Deere actually depreciates the means through which God has

communicated in the past. He insists that those means are always connected with "words of direction" from God without defining those words in other than personal and ministerial terms. But, by defining these words so broadly, he leaves the impression that the words God spoke long ago are on a par with the words He speaks today. That parity is actually crucial to Deere's whole agenda. The simple problem is this: It is not true. To see this fact, we need only reconsider Deere's examples.

As the Old Testament portrays it, whenever God spoke apart from Scripture in the past, He never spoke, or had others speak, anything other than His very own words. Just how radically true this was in Old Testament days is emphasized in Deuteronomy 18, arguably the fundamental biblical text on the role of the Old Testament prophet. Speaking of the prophets to and through whom He would speak after Moses, God Himself says, "I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him....Whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him" (vv. 18-19)¹⁵ Therefore, during the Old Testament period, the words of direction that God spoke "apart from the Scriptures" (i.e., apart from, say, the writings of Moses) were His own words, always expressing accurately what He intended to communicate and invariably invested with absolute authority.

What was true of God's speech alongside the Scriptures during the Old Testament period was also true of his speech alongside the Old Testament Scriptures during the ministries of Jesus and the apostles. The words that the Father spoke to Jesus, and that Jesus spoke in turn to His hearers, were not less than the Father's very own words.

Deere is right to call our attention here especially to John's gospel, which has a particular interest in the Father's communication with and through His Son (see John 3:34; 7:16; 8:28; 12:49-50; 14:10, 24, 31).

Similarly, the words of direction that God communicated to and through the apostles were His very words. This is the import of Jesus' remarks to the apostles during His Farewell Discourse: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you (John 14:26). Again Jesus said to them:

"When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you." (16:13-14)

Thus, Paul, whom Christ added to His apostolate, says of himself and his fellow apostles, (1) the Holy Spirit made known to them the things freely given to us believers by God (1 Cor. 2:10, 12), and (2) they spoke of those things, "not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those [words] taught by the Spirit" (2:13)—words invariably accurate and fully authoritative.¹⁶

The same is evident in Acts: the words of direction that God communicated to and through the apostles and others were always His very own words. Deere and those who agree with him are fond of citing Acts 16:9-10 (Paul's vision of the Macedonian call) as an example of the personal-ministerial and extrabiblical revelation that does not contradict God's revelation in Scripture.¹⁷ Certainly the revelation in this passage is "personal-ministerial and extrabiblical," that is, apart from Scripture as it existed at

that point. But, just as certainly, it is nothing less than one of those always accurate, invariably authoritative words from God.

Consistent with this portrayal of the apostles in Acts, the New Testament prophets are, at least ostensibly, depicted in Acts as following in the footsteps of their Old Testament forebears—that is, they too receive words from God through the Spirit that are His very own words. There are only three occasions in the New Testament where the actual contents of a specific post-Pentecost prophecy are recorded: the two prophecies of Agabus (Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11) and the prophecy of John in the book of Revelation.¹⁸ We may leave aside the example of the book of Revelation, since no one discussing the issue before us questions that the visions in that book communicated God's own words.

As for Agabus, Luke portrays this New Testament prophet as one who spoke whatever words the Holy Spirit had to say. In fact, in Acts 21:10, 11, "Agabus' use of dramatic symbol and quotation formula [tying his own hands and feet with Paul's belt and introducing his oracle with the words 'This is what the Holy Spirit says'] would have signaled to his audience that [his] prophecy was the same in kind as oracles delivered by OT prophets."¹⁹ Indeed, though some persist in questioning the accuracy of Agabus's prophecy in Acts 21, "in every respect, Luke expected his readers to view Agabus in continuity with OT prophets."²⁰

We cannot discuss them here, but other instances from Acts confirm that the words communicated to the apostles and others through many different media were invariably accurate, fully authoritative words from God (e.g., Acts 8:26, 29; 9:10-12; 10:9-19; 13:1-3; 18:9-10). As for the

angelic visitations to which the author of Hebrews refers (Heb. 13:2), the only words the Bible ever represents God's angels as speaking or otherwise communicating were God's very own (Heb. 2:2; Gen. 18-19; Zech. 1:14-16; Rev. 1:1; 22:6).

My aim in all that I have considered so far is to demonstrate that—for all the interest Deere has in teaching us the biblical model of hearing God as practiced by Jesus, the apostles, and others—he fundamentally misrepresents the very model he has chosen. Deere creates the impression that the revelatory words God spoke in biblical times are on a par with the words He speaks today Even if he is right that the "words of direction" in the Bible are both personal and ministerial words, he has still not produced a single incontrovertible biblical example in which those words are anything other than God's very own words. To the contrary, in every example that has come to my attention, God saw to it that whatever He intended to communicate was always accurately expressed and invariably invested with His authority This brings me to some important evidence I have not yet considered—namely, Paul's instructions regarding the church's use of the revelatory gifts.

NO LONGER SPEAKING AS BEFORE

Deere's aim is to persuade that just as God used revelatory gifts to give words of direction to His children in biblical days, so He still does today But this is simply not the whole picture. For Deere, the words God speaks today through those gifts are simply not on a par with the inerrant, fully authoritative words that He spoke in the past.²¹ To find the basis of Deere's affirmations here, we must turn to Professor Wayne Grudem's influential writings on New Testament prophecy²²

Grudem's position can be summarized this way: In the New Testament gift of prophecy (and its correlates—visions, dreams, auditions, words of knowledge, and wisdom) the church should find a source of practical, though fallible, guidance. To adequately consider this proposition, we must notice that Grudem says very plainly that God now speaks as He has never previously spoken. Though the means through which God speaks are purportedly the same, the words He speaks are different from everything He has said before—to the Old Testament saints, to Jesus, to the apostles. In short, the words God speaks have been redefined, for they are no longer His very words, inerrant and authoritative.

If the Bible actually says that this is the case, then so be it. But we need to consider Grudem's evidence from the Bible. Aside from his treatment of Agabus the prophet, Grudem's chief support for prophecy as a source of *fallible practical guidance* comes from two texts: 1 Corinthians 14:29 and I Thessalonians 5:20-22.

In 1 Corinthians 14:29, Paul writes, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment." The issue relevant to our concerns is the unidentified object on which "the others pass judgment." Is it the true and false elements in each oracle,²³ or is it the true and false oracles (of true and false prophets, respectively) among the many oracles the church heard? As others have done, Grudem takes the former view, primarily because the Greek verb (*diakrino*) translated "pass judgment" involves a sorting or sifting activity.²⁴ In favor of the latter view, note that Paul refers to "prophets" (plural) speaking their revelations in 14:29-30, not to mention "prophecies" (plural) in 1 Thessalonians 5:20. In other words, the apostle presupposes that the churches would be hearing multiple prophecies from multiple prophets. In this light, Grudem's

interpretation is clearly not in keeping with Paul's exact words. **The apostle does *not* instruct the churches to sort out the true and false elements in any particular prophecy.** Rather, he instructs them to sort out the true and false prophecies among the many they would hear.²⁵

When we compare this view of 1 Corinthians 14:29 with the use of the verb *diakrino* within and outside the New Testament, we find that it is perfectly consistent with that usage: The verb is applied to sifting wheat from chaff (Philo), distinguishing the clean from the unclean (Josephus), separating the guilty from others (Josephus), discerning good from evil (*Testament of Asher*), sorting true from false (Philo), distinguishing Jews from Gentiles (Acts 15:9; cf. 11:2), distinguishing certain people from others (1 Cor. 4:7), and forming a right (instead of a wrong) judgment of oneself (11:31).²⁶ This evidence falsifies Grudem's claim that the New Testament prefers—and Paul would have preferred—the verb *krino* over *diakrino* "when speaking of judgments where there are only two possibilities, such as 'guilty' or 'not guilty,' 'right' or 'wrong,' or 'true' or 'false'."²⁷ But we look in vain for *any* examples where *diakrino* implies judgments involving more than two possibilities.

To round out our discussion of *diakrino*, notice its use in 1 Corinthians 6:5: "Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren?"²⁸ Contrary to Grudem's argument, in the context immediately following 6:5, Paul shows his awareness of only two possible outcomes when a believer has a grievance against his neighbor: one will be wronged or defrauded (v.7), the other guilty of wrongdoing or defrauding (v.8). The pertinent point, however, is that the wise man's duty, as implied by *diakrino*, is to sort out the

wrongdoer from his victim on the basis of the evidence. By analogy in 1 Corinthians 14:29, the duty of "the others" is to sort out the true prophet from the false prophet on the basis of their oracles (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:3; 14:37; cf. Eph. 4:14-15 with 4:4-6,11).

My conclusions are virtually the same when I consider 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22. In 5:20 Paul warns the Thessalonians not to despise prophecies. Clearly the Thessalonians' esteem for prophecy was not what it should have been. But why? As 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, 15 suggests, they had overreacted to an influx of false prophecies that were confusing them and threatening to lead them astray.²⁹ Consequently, in 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, Paul corrects the Thessalonians' overreaction by directing them to test everything and, having done so, to adhere to what is good and to avoid what is evil. Paul's exact wording in 5:20 ("prophecies" [plural]), coupled with the testing for good and evil in verses 21-22, implies that he was expecting the church to test multiple prophecies among which they would find false prophecies as well as true ones.³⁰ Thus, the instructions to the Thessalonians mirror Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 14:29: The testing of prophecies presupposes that the prophecies heard in the churches might well have included both true and false prophecies (from both true and false prophets, respectively) among them.

In light of these factors, we have to say that Grudem fundamentally misunderstands Paul's directives in 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22. The accuracy of the interpretation presented here, however, is confirmed by its consistency with the broader teaching of the Bible. According to that teaching, the church, like Israel, judged prophecies in order to separate the true prophets from the false (Deut. 13:1-5; 1 Kings 13; Matt.

7:15-20 with 12:32-37 and 24:23-26; 1 John 4:1-6; cf. Rom. 16:17-19). In carrying out this responsibility, the church exercised discernment based on the explicit, absolute standards of good and evil (1 Thess. 5:21-22), truth and error (1 John 4:1-6), and thus determined the source of the prophecies they heard, whether they were from the Holy Spirit or from some other source.³¹

We may say, therefore, that for Paul and the rest of the New Testament authors, the judging of New Testament prophecies was a process of evaluating the prophets' oracles in order to pass judgment on the prophets themselves and thus discern the source of their oracles. This interpretation, we submit, is alone able to account for the admonitions that Christ and His apostles gave to the church regarding false prophecies and false prophets. The church was told in no uncertain terms not to tolerate prophets whose words were false or evil and were thus a threat to lead them astray (Matt. 7:15-20 with 12:32-37 and 24:23-26; 1 John 4:1-6; 1 Thess. 5:22; 2 Thess. 2:3, 15; Rev. 2:20-23; cf. Rom. 16:17-19).

CONCLUSION

Some present-day evangelicals, **Jack Deere and Wayne Grudem among them, believe and teach that God speaks today apart from the Bible. According to these teachers, God gives words of personal or ministry direction to His people using all the same means that He used in the past. Yet, when we consider the evidence for these views, we find that their resemblance to what the Bible actually depicts is more apparent than real. Whatever else Deere is teaching, he is not teaching the model of hearing God's voice as practiced in the Bible itself. Similarly, Grudem has transformed Paul into an eccentric who is patently out of step with other New Testament**

authors, indeed with all other biblical authors, when it comes to the crucial matter of judging prophecies.

In my judgment,³² what these teachers and their disciples fail to appreciate is that, in the Bible, God's activity of speaking apart from the Scriptures occurred at a time when those documents were still being written. Interestingly, during that long history of Scripture writing, God's people did live by a "Scripture plus" principle of authority, and, in keeping with that principle, God employed various means to speak His extrascriptural words to them. But today the church is faced with a new situation: now, with centuries of Christian orthodoxy, we confess that the writing of Scripture is finished, that the canon is actually closed.

But *why* does the church affirm that the canon is closed? The only demonstrable basis for this affirmation is that God's giving of revelation, spoken and written, is always historically joined to and qualified by God's work of redemption.³³ Now that God has accomplished salvation once-for-all, in Christ, He has also spoken His word, once-for-all, in Christ and in those whom Christ authorized and empowered by His Spirit (Heb. 1:1-2; 2:3, 4; Matt. 16:15-19; John 14:26; Eph. 2:19, 20). With the completion of salvation in Christ comes the cessation of revelation. Consequently, the church now lives by a "Scripture only" principle of authority To tamper with this principle invites a host of theological and pastoral problems. The proof of this observation can be seen in the effect of these "prophecies" upon many who are being led far afield from the sufficiency of the gospel itself. Its finality and complete sufficiency is, in reality, subtly assaulted by these claims to modern prophecies.

Finally, the Bible gives us no reason to expect that God will speak to His children today apart from the Scriptures.³⁴ Those who teach otherwise need to explain to God's children how these words "freshly spoken from heaven" can be so necessary and strategic to God's highest purposes for their lives when their Father does nothing to ensure that they will ever actually hear those words. Indeed, they must explain why this is not quenching the Spirit. Moreover, the promise of such guidance inevitably diverts attention from the Scriptures, particularly in the practical and pressing concerns of life. Let us never underestimate just how serious this diversion really is. In the Bible the church hears God's true voice; in the Scriptures, we know that He is speaking His very words to us. Advocates of words "freshly spoken from heaven" should beware: **By diverting attention from the Scriptures, they quench the Spirit who is speaking therein.**

NOTES

1. Throughout this chapter, the terms the *Bible*, the *Scriptures*, and *Scripture* will refer to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, excluding those books commonly called the Apocrypha.
2. The *New American Standard Bible* rightly brings out the ongoing nature of God's action of speaking by translating the present participle (*ton lalounta*) in Heb. 12:25 as "Him who is speaking." The accuracy of this insight is confirmed by the fact that His speaking is contrasted with God's past warnings in the same verse.
3. William DeArteaga, *Quenching the Spirit: Examining the Centuries of Opposition to the Moving of the Holy Spirit* (Altamonte Springs, Fla.: Creation House, 1992).
4. Mark Thompson, "Spiritual Warfare: What Happens When I Contradict Myself," *The Briefing* no. 45/46 (24 April 1990): 11. This quotation, originally taken from a 1990 conference talk by Jack Deere, is cited without denial, qualification, or retraction by Deere in his essay "Vineyard Position Paper #2: The Vineyard's Response to *The Briefing*" (Anaheim, Calif.: Association of Vineyard Churches, 1992), 22-23.
5. For an informative, detailed, and (virtually) nonevaluative survey of charismatic views of prophecy, see Mark J. Cartledge, "Charismatic Prophecy: A Definition and Description," *Journal of Pentecostal*

Theology 5 (1994): 79-1 20.

6. Illustrative of this viewpoint are the following words from John Murray ("The Guidance of the Holy Spirit," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Volume 1: The Claims of *Truth* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 19761]: We must rely upon the Holy Spirit to direct and guide us in the understanding and application of God's will as revealed in Scripture, and we must be constantly conscious of our need of the Holy Spirit to apply the Word effectively to us in each situation. The function of the Holy Spirit in such matters is that of illumination as to what the will of the Lord is, and of imparting to us the willingness and strength to do that will. . . As we are the subjects of this illumination and are responsive to it, and as the Holy Spirit is operative in us to the doing of God's will, we shall have feelings, impressions, convictions, urges, inhibitions, impulses, burdens, resolutions. Illumination and direction by the Spirit through the Word of God will focus themselves in our consciousness in these ways. . . It is here, however, that careful distinction is necessary The moment we desire or expect or think that a state of our consciousness is the effect of a direct intimation to us of the Holy Spirit's will, or consists in such an intimation and is therefore in the category of special direction from him, then we have given way to the notion of special, direct, detached communication from the Holy Spirit. And this, in respect of its nature, belongs to the same category as belief in special revelation. The only way whereby we can avoid this error is to maintain that the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit is through the means which he has provided, and that his work is to enable us rightly to interpret and apply the Scripture in the various situations of life, and to enable us to, interpret all the factors which enter into each situation in the light of Scripture. (pp. 188-89)

7. Deere, "Vineyard Position Paper #2," 15. The similarity between Deere's teaching and that of Pentecostal theologian J. Rodman Williams (*Renewal Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988-921, 1:43-44 and 2:382] is worth noting.

8. Deere, "Vineyard Position Paper #2," 23.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid. Deere's description of hearing God's voice is profoundly similar to the (more or less) typical charismatic description. See Cartledge, "Charismatic Prophecy," 82-99.

14. See not only Deere's "Vineyard Position Paper #2," 22-24, but also his *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: A Former Dallas Seminary Professor Discovers That God Speaks and Heals Today* (Grand Rapids:

Zondervan, 1993), 213-15.

15. In Numbers 12:6-8 and Deuteronomy 13:1-5, God links the activity of the prophet with the dreams and visions of the seer. Notice that, even when God employed different media to speak with the prophets after Moses, that distinction did not change the nature of what they spoke: they, like Moses, spoke the very words of God.

16. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 60-61.

17. I first heard Deere cite this passage in a paper presentation at the annual meeting the Evangelical Theological Society November 1991. See also his "Appendix 7: The Sufficiency of Scripture and Distortion of What Scripture Teaches About Itself," in *The Kingdom and the Power: Are Healing and the Spiritual Gifts Used by Jesus and the Early Church Meant for the Church Today?* ed. Gary S. Greig and Kevin N. Springer (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1993), 440.

18. Richard B. Gaffin, "A Friend's Response to Wayne Grudem" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 21 November 1992), 2.

19. John W Hilber, "Diversity of OT Prophetic Phenomena and NT Prophecy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 56 (1994): 255. Also, the introductory phrase Agabus uses (*tade legei*) is identical to the phrase John uses to introduce his direct quotation of Christ's messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14 (Robert L. Thomas, "Prophecy Rediscovered? A Review of the Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 119921:91). Moreover, the words are equivalent to the phrase "what the Spirit says to the churches," which closes each of Christ's messages (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Furthermore, as Hilber (p. 255 n. 47) points out, Grudem fails to take into account that Agabus's introductory words are the quotation formula in the Greek Old Testament for "Thus says the Lord." Clearly, this is the most relevant background for our interpretation of Acts 21:11. In fact, Hilber (*ibid.*) points out that Agabus's "substitution of 'Holy Spirit' for 'Yahweh' [the LORD] is consistent with the theological tendency in Acts to attribute divine work to the Holy Spirit."

20. Hilber, "Diversity of OT Prophetic Phenomena," 256. Hilber notes that Grudem concedes the accuracy of Agabus's prophecy in Acts 11:28. On the accuracy, if imprecision, of Agabus in Acts 21, see Hilber (pp. 250 n. 31, 255-56) and the literature he cites, as well as David B. McWilliams, "Something New Under the Sun?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 325-26.

21. Deere has intimated his agreement with Grudem's position on New Testament prophecy, which denies the infallibility of present-day

prophetic utterances (see n. 22 below). Nevertheless, in his published comments on God's "fresh words from heaven," Deere has not explicitly ruled out the possibility that those words may be God's own words unmixed with words from other sources. All he has said is that they do not contradict the Bible. The latter affirmation does not preclude the infallibility of these "fresh" words of direction, provided Deere believes that God reveals His will on two tracks, one public and one private. On this latter point, see the conclusion to this chapter.

22. See Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988); and Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1049-61. Though not explicitly stated in his writings to date, Deere's indebtedness to and general agreement with Grudem are discernible and otherwise well known among those who have heard him comment on the subject of New Testament prophecy. In a planned forthcoming book, tentatively entitled *Surprised by the Voice of God*, Deere's own thoughts on the New Testament revelatory gifts will be published. For the present essay, the broad outline of his teaching and its compatibility with Grudem's views have been gleaned from "Vineyard Position Paper #2," 14-15, 22-24; and from *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*, chap. 10 ("Why God Gives Miraculous Gifts") and Epilogue ("Hearing God Speak Today").

23. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 74-79; cf. 104-5.

24. Ibid., 76-79. Of I Corinthians 14:29, M. M. B. Turner ("Spiritual Gifts Then and Now," *Vox Evangelica* 15 119851) has written, "The presupposition is that any one New Testament prophetic oracle is expected to be *mixed* in quality, and the wheat must be separated from the chaff" (p. 16).

25. For a similar conclusion, see Hilber, "Diversity of OT Prophetic Phenomena," 256-58.

26. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 76.

27. Ibid., 77.

28. Ibid.

29. According to 2 Thessalonians 2:2, a false prophet or an oracle of a false prophet ("spirit" NASB; "prophecy" NIV; Gk. *pneuma*) had disturbed and was threatening to deceive the Thessalonians. Contrary to Grudem's analysis (*The Gift of Prophecy*, 104-5), we have no indication that they had overreacted to Paul's teaching that true prophecies were less authoritative than Scripture.

30. Contrary to Grudem's inference (*The Gift of Prophecy*, 104-5), Paul's words do not imply that there were many things that were not good in the true prophecies the Thessalonians were hearing.

31. In line with this picture we find Paul citing standards by which the congregations should judge prophecies (1 Cor. 12:3; 14:37; 1 Thess.

5:21-22; 2 Thess. 2:15; and perhaps Eph. 4:4-15 with 4:4-6, 11). These standards are in stark contrast to Grudem's graded scale of value and truth in New Testament prophecies. See Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy*, 76-77. Strikingly, Pentecostal theologian Williams (*Renewal Theology*, 2:382 n. 164, 2:386 n. 187) emphatically rejects Grudem's interpretation of New Testament prophetic oracles as a mixture of true and false and of the judging activity applied thereto.

32. For a more complete exposition of the concerns broached in this conclusion, see Gaffin, "A Friend's Response to Wayne Grudem," 6-12. See also Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ.: Presb. & Ref., 1979), 97-99, and his "The New Testament as Canon," in Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate, ed. H. M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 172-81.

33. See Herman N. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 2d rev. ed., trans. H. De Jongste and rev. R. B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presb. & Ref., 1988), passim, esp. p. 31. Of special note, though Deere teaches that the canon is closed, he fails to grasp the relationship between revelation and redemption and can therefore provide no rationale or basis for his teaching.

34. It remains for those who differ with this conclusion to produce the evidence that shifts the burden of proof from themselves to others.

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IV. Illumination

The Holy Spirit Gives Spiritual Understanding

by J.I. Packer

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

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 1 Corinthians 2:14

The knowledge of divine things to which Christians are called is more than a formal acquaintance with biblical words and Christian ideas. It is a realizing of the reality and relevance of those activities of the triune God to which Scripture testifies. Such awareness is natural to none, familiar with Christian ideas though they may be (like "the man without the Spirit" in 1 Cor. 2:14 who cannot receive what Christians tell him, or the blind leaders of the blind of whom Jesus speaks so caustically in Matt. 15:14, or like Paul himself before Christ met him on the Damascus road). Only the Holy Spirit, searcher of the deep things of God (1 Cor. 2:10), can bring about this realization in our sin-darkened minds and hearts. That is why it is called "spiritual understanding" (spiritual means "Spirit-given," Col. 1:9; cf. Luke 24:25; 1 John 5:20). Those who, along with sound verbal instruction, "have an anointing from the Holy One... know the truth" (1 John 2:20).

The work of the Spirit in imparting this knowledge is called "illumination," or enlightening. **It is not a giving of new revelation, but a work within us that enables us to grasp and to love the revelation that is there before us in the biblical text as heard and read, and as explained by teachers and writers.** Sin in our mental and moral system clouds our minds and wills so that we miss and resist the force of Scripture. God seems to us

remote to the point of unreality, and in the face of God's truth we are dull and apathetic. **The Spirit, however, opens and unveils our minds and attunes our hearts so that we understand** (Eph. 1:17-18; 3:18-19; 2 Cor. 3:14-16; 4:6). As by inspiration he provided Scripture truth for us, so now by illumination he interprets it to us. Illumination is thus the applying of God's revealed truth to our hearts, so that we grasp as reality for ourselves what the sacred text sets forth.

Illumination, which is a lifelong ministry of the Holy Spirit to Christians, starts before conversion with a growing grasp of the truth about Jesus and a growing sense of being measured and exposed by it. Jesus said that the Spirit would "convict the world" of the sin of not believing in him, of the fact that he was in the right with God the Father (as his welcome back to heaven proved), and of the reality of judgment both here and hereafter (John 16:8-11). This threefold conviction is still God's means of making sin repulsive and Christ adorable in the eyes of persons who previously loved sin and cared nothing for the divine Savior. The way to benefit fully from the Spirit's ministry of illumination is by serious Bible study, serious prayer, and serious response in obedience to whatever truths one has been shown already. This corresponds to Luther's dictum that three things make a theologian: oratio (prayer), meditatio (thinking in God's presence about the text), and tentatio (trial, the struggle for biblical fidelity in the face of pressure to disregard what Scripture says).

V. Revelation outside of the Canon

R.A. McLaughlin

<http://www.thirdmill.org/answers/answer.asp/file/99954.qna/category/th/page/questions/site/iiim> (found on Monergism)

Regarding the nature of the Canon, one cannot be properly called "Reformed" without adhering to *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), which states that Scripture alone is the final authority in all matters of doctrine and religion. If one argues that special revelation (e.g. dreams, visions, spectacular prophecies) has not ceased, and that current special revelation is authoritative (i.e. on the level with Scripture), then one necessarily rejects *sola Scriptura*. One may still adhere to a Calvinistic system of salvation (i.e. the Five Points), and to covenant theology, but these in and of themselves are not sufficient to classify one as "Reformed."

There are people, however, who believe in the actual or potential post-apostolic presence of spectacular gifts of special revelation, but who do not believe this new special revelation to be authoritative. These, while accepting new revelation, do not challenge *sola Scriptura*. Generally, they argue that new special revelation is fallible, unlike biblical special revelation, and therefore that it is not as authoritative as Scripture.

A somewhat different version of the position is that new special revelation is true because it comes from God, and therefore it is infallible. It is not, however, authoritative. That is to say, infallibility/truth is not the source of authority—God is. Because God has not commissioned any new authoritative covenant emissaries (the apostles were the last), there cannot be any new authoritative revelation. Thus, not only must all new special revelation be subjected to the judgment of Scripture to judge its truth, but it also must submit to the authority of Scripture. New special revelation does not in and of itself have the authority to

bind believers or their consciences—even if the new revelation is true. This may have been the case with non-apostolic prophecy even in the New Testament (1 Cor. 14:29).

So, there are a couple different possible scenarios in which one might believe in the modern manifestation of spectacular gifts like prophecy and tongues, yet still affirm *sola Scriptura* by saying that there is no new authoritative/canonical revelation. If one affirms *sola Scriptura* and the closure of the Canon, then there is no inherent inconsistency in also believing in the continuation or modification of the gifts.

VI. Greg Gilbert's Review of Two books:

http://www.9marks.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID314526%7CCHID775980%7CCIID1562250,00.html

Jensen, Philip and Tony Payne, *Guidance and the Voice of God*. (Matthias Media: 1997)

Greg Gilbert :"Most of us spend at least some part of every day wondering what is God's will for our life, and the tendency is to treat that question like some sort of cosmic game—God sending us the clues and we trying to figure out what they all mean and piece them together into a recognizable pattern. Phillip Jensen and Tony Payne, in their book *Guidance and the Voice of God*, set out to show us that to approach life and decisions in that way is a most confusing way to live our lives, and in fact not at all worthy of a people who claim to serve a God who speaks clearly and forcefully into the world.

Even if a person believes absolutely in God's sovereign guidance of our lives, this is the point where we most often find ourselves confused. This is the point where we begin

looking for signs and wonders and writing in the sky and talking donkeys to tell us what God's will is. Jensen lists five propositions about how God guides us (64):

1. God, in his sovereignty, uses everything to guide us 'behind the scenes.'
2. In many and varied ways, God *can* speak to his people, and guide them with their conscious cooperation.
3. In these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son.
4. God speaks today by his Son through his Spirit in the Scriptures.
5. Apart from his Spirit working through Scripture, God does not promise to use any other means to guide us, nor should we expect him to.

The questions of *who* we should marry, *which* church we should attend, or *where* we should live and work are ones that occupy our minds almost every day. Those are the questions we are interested in, so doesn't that mean they are also the *right* questions? Jensen and Payne say that in fact they aren't.

The point is this: if we ask the wrong question, we either get the wrong answer or no answer at all. And if we get no answer, we are tempted to turn elsewhere to find an answer. Many of our problems with guidance stem from precisely this: we ask the wrong questions, and then wonder why we cannot find answers. (85)

Then, of course, we turn away from the Bible thinking that it isn't helping us much, and look to other sources of guidance—signs, "fleeces," "a sense of peace," inner promptings, etc. If we were asking the right questions, though, we would find that the Bible has all we need to

know.

We are terribly concerned about choosing between Druscilla and Mary-Lou. We think the success of our whole married life will depend on the right choice, and we agonize over it. However, God's priority is for us to be godly, whether we are single or married, and whether we marry Druscilla or Mary-Lou. (85-86)

Looking to the Bible, we would find that God wants us to marry someone who is a Christian, who is not already married, and who is of the opposite sex. And he wants us to love that person as Christ loved the church. Within those parameters, we may choose to marry anyone we please. Of course, God has a sovereign plan for who you are to marry, if at all. But that does not mean that He will reveal that plan to you in advance. He may simply give you the guidelines in His word, call on you to conform to them and make a decision, and then have you look back in a few years to realize that all the while He was guiding you "behind the scenes" to the right person. If your life and decision is conformed to the guidelines laid out in the Scriptures, you cannot make a sinful or wrong decision. Anything within those guidelines is good and right.

One of the best parts of this book is Jensen's description of the three basic categories of decisions that we make in everyday life. First, there are matters of **righteousness**, which are decisions clearly addressed by the word of God (i.e., do not commit adultery). When we come against one of these decisions, we should simply obey. Second, there are matters of **good judgment**, which is where wisdom is so absolutely necessary. There are many times when more than one option seems right. Good judgment and wisdom help us to know that some decisions simply work out better

in this world. In the third category are matters of **triviality**. When we finally stand before the throne of God and see our lives from his perspective, I wonder if we will be shocked to find out how many of the decisions we agonize over in this life actually fall into this category.

The whole discussion of these categories falls into a great section on wisdom, which Jensen defines as "the art of living successfully in God's world," (88). Because so many of our decisions in life fall into the "good judgment" category, any Christian should eagerly desire to have wisdom, to be able to look at a situation and be so instructed by the Word of God that the best course of action seems clear. One of the best ways to so train your mind and heart is to read the book of Proverbs. Each of those verses that you hide in your heart is one more principle you can apply to any given situation in order to come to a sound and wise decision. But what if we make a decision that is unwise? What happens then?

Will I have to suffer the consequences? Most likely, yes. God wants us to learn wisdom, and very few people learn wisdom if their folly is continually rewarded. However, God does protect his people—we do not need to be anxious about it. He won't allow us to be lost because of our own folly or to be tempted beyond our strength. He will pick up the pieces and make sure that we survive and grow through the experience. If it is in our best interests to suffer the consequences of our folly, then God will bring them to us, but if it isn't, then God will spare us. We can trust his generosity and power to do so. (95-96)

Willard, Dallas, Hearing God.

Intervarsity Press: 1999

"as with all close personal relationships, we can surely count on God to speak to each of us when and as it is appropriate," (10).

"Still small voice" Elijah 1 Kings

In determining whether he has heard from God he writes, "Often by the end of the hour or so there has stood forth within my consciousness an idea or thought with that peculiar quality, spirit and content that I have come to associate with God's voice. If so, I may write it down for further study. . . . Or I may decide to reconsider the matter by repeating the same process after a short period of time," (200).

"It is a similar situation when we are given a word from God and are sure of it, but the events indicated do not come to pass. Others may be involved, and they may not know or may not do the will of God. And God may not override them," (209).

Let me get this straight—God tells me He is going to bring something to pass, but because all the ducks don't fall into line, His plans are thwarted and the still, small voice ends up crawling back to me with an embarrassed "Oops" and a blushing shrug of the shoulders. Wouldn't it make more sense to say that perhaps Willard is simply mistaken in thinking that what was "given" to him as a "word from God" really *wasn't* in fact a word from God? It seems like it would make more sense to question his own interpretation of the firings of his mind than it would to question the power of God to bring His purposes to effect.

VII. “God told me” and the Sufficiency of Scripture

By Mark Dever

http://www.9marks.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID314526%7CCHID598016%7CCIID1552702,00.html

I was dumbfounded (a pretty rare occurrence). This fellow had just told me that his supervisor had assigned him the task to make a master-plan for a new church plant, and that when he prayed about it God told him just to use the words of Jesus. Let me be clear. He said that God told him that in his planning for this new church, he was only to consult, reflect upon, quote the words of Jesus.

This fellow was a full-time employee of a Christian organization. He was evidently himself a Christian. Too, unlike other employees of this organization, he had a Masters of Divinity. And that from an evangelical seminary. He had been then, we are to assume, carefully trained in the Bible and theology. We should also assume that he had provided credible and helpful leadership to a local church somewhere, if he was now in the very responsible position that he was in. And it was this person who stood there and told me in all sincere piety and simple trust that God told him only to consult the words of Jesus when planning for a new church.

If you've ever seen those old Key-stone Kops movies where all of these 1910-circa cops with high, rounded hats and billy-clubs come rushing in to a scene in an over-crowded car, get out, rush around, and then all converge on the same point, creating mayhem and humor, you have some idea of what it felt like was going on in my brain as I listened to this friend. Except for the humor. "Jesus only mentioned the church explicitly twice!" I thought. "There are more than 20 other books in the New Testament that were composed as letters to churches to instruct them!" I thought. "How did you get this responsibility?" I thought.

"What did they teach you at seminary?" I thought. "How did God tell you?" I thought. "What else has 'He' said?" I thought.

There were more. I said nothing, partly out of surprise, partly out of fear of what I might say. After a few more brief questions and rambling answers, I decided to say something simple about how there were other books in the New Testament that Christ's Spirit had inspired particularly for the direction of churches, and that I hoped he would consider them as well, and then I made a quick exit. I hoped my awkwardness wasn't evident.

It was exchanges like this one—many of them—over the last few years that has encouraged me to consider afresh the importance of the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. **This doctrine was a keystone in the Protestant Reformation. One of the principal disputes between Rome and the Reformers was whether God had promised that He would continue to provide inspired, unerring instruction through Peter and his successors. Rome said that that's what Jesus taught in Matthew 16. The Reformers denied this, saying that, instead, the Scriptures themselves were sufficient for our instruction, albeit with the Holy Spirit's illumination of our minds. They taught that the Scriptures would be perspicuous—that is, clear—and sufficient. Matters important to us would be reasonably clear, not obscure. And the Scriptures taken as a whole would suffice for our needs for divine guidance. Many other issues are related, but the one we're considering is simply that the Scriptures are sufficient.**

While evangelical Protestantism as a whole has continued to teach this—flanked by the claimed authority of the

Roman church and tradition on the right, and by the subjective claims for the authority of each person's "inner light" by the Quakers on our left—there has grown up within evangelicalism another thought. More in our piety than in our written theology, **there has grown up the idea that God's Word written must become God's Word to us personally by some sort of powerful encounter with it or its meaning.** This isn't conceived of in tomes of divinity, as Neo-Orthodox theologians like Karl Barth developed it, but in simple, regular practice. I think of another friend who attended an evangelical student fellowship, where for two hours the students sang and prayed earnestly and pleadingly that God would speak to them, all the while with their Bibles lying there closed on their seats. This is the problem that "God told me" piety brings for the sufficiency of Scripture. **And where we pastors and elders do not understand that Scripture is sufficient, we cannot be surprised if our church members, in sincere search for the truth, wander off to Rome on the one hand, or liberal subjectivism on the other looking for some kind of sufficient authority.** Mormons particularly exploit evangelical weakness on this issue of being uninstructed about Scripture's sufficiency.

This issue is of vital concern to us as pastors, particularly as pastors who realize the centrality of Biblical exposition to our ministry. An understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture is the context in which we assert, maintain and practice the centrality of Scripture in the life of the church.

Twenty years ago, in the midst of the flurry of writing about the inerrancy of Scripture, little was being written about the sufficiency of Scripture. It appeared in writings about the Reformers' views of Scriptures. So you could read R. C. Sproul's fine essay, "Sola Scriptura: Crucial to

Evangelicalism," in *The Foundations of Biblical Authority*, ed. James Montgomery Boice (Zondervan, 1978), pp. 101-119. More recently, Wayne Grudem has written a largely fine chapter on the Sufficiency of Scripture in his *Systematic Theology*. The final few pages are dedicated to practical applications of the doctrine, and in them is much wisdom. He clearly asserts that "when we are facing a problem of genuine importance to our Christian life, we can approach Scripture with the confidence that from it God will provide us with guidance for that problem," (p. 131).

More recently still, Timothy Ward has written a careful piece considering traditional claims to the sufficiency of Scripture in light of contemporary hermeneutical issues, "The Diversity and Sufficiency of Scripture," Paul Helm & Carl Trueman, eds., *The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the nature of Scripture* (Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 192-218. Don Kistler has edited a more popular volume *Sola Scriptura* (Soli Deo Gloria, 1995) in which John MacArthur has a clear chapter on "The Sufficiency of the Written Word," (pp. 151-183). The Banner of Truth has once again served us well by bringing out a whole volume on the topic by Noel Weeks entitled simply *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (1988). And David King and William Webster have recently collaborated to bring us a three-volume set which defends the thesis that the early church fathers believed and taught that the Scriptures were authoritative and sufficient (*Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith*, 3 vols., (Christian Resources, 2001).

On the 9Marks Ministries website, we now offer you another resource, coming at this from the other direction, so to speak. We are looking at this challenge not from formulations of the doctrine of Scripture.(For that vital work, see the books and articles cited above.) **We, rather, are considering this issue from the perspective of**

the average Christian, wondering how they should know God's will. It's very often here, in the culture of your congregation that the sufficiency and therefore the centrality of Scripture is first, and most thoroughly, and most disastrously undermined. So, we asked our own Greg Gilbert to review a number of works (there are many more out there) currently published on this question of knowing the will of God. We hope that you find them of some help. Feel free and reprint them in your church newsletter, perhaps in a series. Simply give credit and refer to the 9Marks Ministries website address.

If we are going to be committed to centering our shepherding on feeding the sheep and leading them by God's Word, then we had best be able to consider what it means that the Scriptures are sufficient. We need to know, consider, explain and teach that the Scriptures are sufficient. I know they are. God told me. 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," (II Timothy 3:16-17).

VIII. Inspiration

By Michael Bremer

<http://www.mbremer.com/bible/bible.htm>

The apostle states,

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tm. 3:16).

Inspired is the Greek word theopneustos and means "God-breathed." When we say that Scripture is inspired by God

we mean the same thing as the apostle Paul, that Scripture is God-breathed. At onetime, this definition was adequate for defining the doctrine of inspiration, but the constant attacks on this doctrine have made it necessary to particularize the definition of inspiration.

THE MEANING OF INSPIRATION

(i) Some insist that not everything in the Bible is Scripture, but only what is inspired can rightly be called Scripture. Not surprisingly, they decide what is inspired and what is not. To illustrate the problem, a person can say that he believes Scripture is inspired by God, yet does not believe that the events in Genesis 1-3 are actually historical events. He can deny the Virgin birth, the resurrection, or anything he does not like because he believes not everything in the Bible is inspired, therefore, not everything in the Bible is Scripture. Obviously, the word "Scripture" does not have the same meaning with all, therefore, it is important in any discussion on inspiration that all do have the same understanding of what Scripture means. Those who hold to Biblical view of inspiration agree that the word "Scripture" refers to the whole Bible, all sixty-six books. From Genesis to Revelation, all Scripture is God-breathed.

(ii) The Scriptures are verbally inspired. Verbal inspiration means every word of Scripture is exactly the words that God meant. This view is supported by both Jesus statements on the subject, and by His use of Scripture. On one occasion Jesus said of the Scriptures, *"Do not think that I came to abolish the law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished"* (Mt. 5.17-18). Jesus believed that not only the words of Scripture are inspired, but also the very letters

that form the words are inspired from God. On another occasion, the Sadducees came to Jesus attempting to disprove the doctrine of the resurrection. Jesus said to them,

"You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures, or the power of God.... But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead but of the living" (Mt. 22.29-33).

Jesus' remark, "Have you not read that which was spoken to you by God," demonstrates that Jesus believed that the Scriptures were verbally inspired. Also, note how Jesus defends the doctrine of the resurrection on the very tenses of the words: "I am the God of . . ." Jesus considered the Scriptures to be the inspired word of God even in the very tenses of the words.

Although the Scriptures teach verbal inspiration, they do not teach the idea of mechanical dictation. The mechanical dictation theory of inspiration teaches that God used the writers of Scripture as robots, only writing as God dictates, and their personality was not a factor in the Scripture's composition. The Scripture, however, teaches the Divine-human authorship. Every word divine; and every stroke of the pen human.

(iii) The original Scriptures are without error, "Thy word is Truth" (Jn. 17.17). Both the Old and New Testaments are without error in all that they affirm. They are truth without any mixture of error.

(iv). Inspiration is plenary, meaning the whole Bible is inspired. The apostle Paul states, "All Scripture is inspired of God" (2 Tm. 3.16), not "Some Scripture is inspired of

God." However, there are some who do not believe that *all* Scripture is inspired of God. We will now consider some of these partial inspiration views.

PARTIAL INSPIRATION VIEWS

(i) One partial inspiration view teaches that only the thoughts or ideas are inspired. This view teaches that God gave the basic message to the writers of Scripture, without any supernatural influence on the writers, but allowed the writers to express themselves as they desired. Without this influence, the writers were naturally influenced by their backgrounds, presuppositions, and at times, their mistaken ideas about science and history. Obviously, this view of inspiration holds that there are errors and discrepancies in the Scriptures. Orthodox Christians, however, maintain the impossibility of separating thoughts and ideas from the words that express them. Ideas are expressed in words. The assertion that thoughts and ideas are inspired, but not the words that express them, is absurd. Hodge rightly observed, "Infallibility of thought cannot be secured or preserved independently of an infallible verbal rendering (A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* 67).

Second, the Scriptures themselves claim to be verbally inspired. The Apostle Paul said in 2 Tm. 3.16 that not only are the thoughts and ideas "God-breathed" but also the Scriptures themselves are God-breathed. Likewise, Jesus said "The words (not thoughts) I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn. 6.63). [see also: Ps. 19; 119.9-11; Mt. 5.17; 22.23-32; Gal. 3.16]

(ii) Another partial inspiration view is that the Scriptures are inspired only in matters of faith and practice. This view denies the inspiration of Scripture when it comes to matters regarding history or science. Therefore, according to this

view, the Scriptures contain many historical and scientific errors, but are inspired and without error when speaking about matters regarding faith and practice. However, the problem with this view is since many fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith are so interwoven with historical events, i. e., the fall of Adam, the incarnation, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, etc. Denying the inspiration of historical events, therefore, brings these very fundamental doctrines into question.

Furthermore, if God is able to ensure the Scripture's inspiration and accuracy regarding matters of faith and practice, then why is He not able to do the same regarding history and science? The orthodox position is that the whole of Scripture, including its historical and scientific contents, is God-breathed.

(iii) The Scriptures are not the word of God, but they become the word of God as the reader "encounters" God in them. In other words, God makes the Scripture inspired to the individual. What the Christian is asked to believe in this view is that even though the Scriptures are full of errors and discrepancies, God makes them inspired to the seeking believer. Forgetting the fact no Biblical support for this view exists, this view of inspiration is a greater miracle than the Biblical view of inspiration. Although God could not ensure the accuracy of the Scriptures through its human authors, He nevertheless takes what is inaccurate and makes it inspired for the seeking believer—Truly miraculous!

All partial views of inspiration have one significant fault. Who decides what is inspired in the Scriptures and what is not? If Scripture is only partially inspired, then who decides what parts are God's word and what parts are not? Does this crucial responsibility belong to the fallible theologian? Who is "qualified" to separate the inspired from the non-

inspired? The problem with all partial views of inspiration, is they cunningly take the Scriptures out the believer's hands by making its exposition dependent on so-called experts who are as fallible as their fallible Scriptures they claim to expound.

Summarizing, the Scriptures, all sixty-six books of the Bible, are verbally and plenary inspired by God, and are therefore without error in all that they affirm.

DIVINE-HUMAN AUTHORSHIP

***"For no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God"* (2 Pet. 1.21).**

By misunderstanding the nature of Scripture's Divine-human authorship some assume the Scriptures must contain errors. This false assumption is the result of not distinguishing the Divine element in the divine-human relationship of inspiration. The Scriptures are indeed the composition of human authors, and their environment, personality, religious background, education, intelligence, etc., can be easily traced throughout their writings. Considering also the fact "to error is human," it is understandable that some hold the position that human authorship necessarily introduces the element of error--understandable, that is, if only viewed from the human side of inspiration.

The Scriptures, however, are the result of Divine-human authorship, by "men moved by the Holy Spirit." Young, in his excellent book, *Thy Word is Truth*, explains:

"What kind of God is He who cannot reveal to the world a message that is free from error? Surely, He must be limited and restricted indeed! Those of us who from time to time engage in a bit of writing are happy to have a stenographer

who types our work accurately. If we discover the stenographer is constantly making mistakes in her typing, and that these mistakes are of so serious a nature that our work is actually obscured and marred thereby, we shall probably change stenographers. God, however, if the position we are considering now is correct, cannot even do this. God is far more limited than we mortals. We have the ability of hiring someone who will do our work for us as we desire it done; God, on the other hand, cannot even do that. When God would speak to mankind in writing, He cannot get His message across without having it cluttered up with irritating errors . . . If indeed man can thus thwart Him, it is pertinent to ask, Is He really worth knowing after all" (p. 73).

THE AUTOGRAPHS

Some suppose that since the original writings of Scripture, called autographs, no longer exist, any argument for or against the doctrine of inerrancy is pointless. However, this conclusion is groundless.

In construction, they construct a building with the help of a benchmark, a reference point for the measurements of the building. Before construction begins, a survey crew will set a post in the ground and on this post place a benchmark. This mark now becomes the take off point for the measurements of building. If the benchmark was somehow moved or lost after construction began, it could be accurately reproduced by going to a place where the benchmark had been used, preferably one or several closest to the original benchmark. By doing this, the original benchmark could be reliably reproduced. However, to find that the benchmark itself was inaccurate is altogether different matter, and in construction such an error could be catastrophic, for now the entire foundation could be wrong.

A further illustration may help. Suppose a School teacher asked her seventh grade class to copy the Gettysburg Address as she accurately read it to them. It is reasonable to assume that some students would perform the requested task without error, while others would, in varying degrees, make errors. Is it possible to reconstruct accurately the Gettysburg Address from only the student's copies, even if some, or even all, contain errors? All we need do is gather up all the copies and compare them one with another and eliminate the errors. For example, the teacher collected thirty copies from her students, and out of thirty, twenty-eight began with "Four score and seven years ago" while the remaining two read "Four score and five years ago," and "Seven score and four years ago" respectively. Since the students did not make identical errors, one is easily able to discern that the correct rendering is "Four score and seven years ago." Following this procedure all the way through the student's copies, one can very accurately determine the original Gettysburg Address.

The process described is a *very simplistic* model of textual criticism. Textual criticism provides believers with a highly accurate translation of the Scriptures. The numerous manuscripts available to the textual critic have made it possible to reproduce translations that are nearly identical to the original writings. Various Scholars have put the figure at 999 out of a 1000 words to be identical to the original writings. The believer, therefore, can rest assuredly that he has a near-perfect text.

Now, the whole point of all this is, if the originals are errant, then despite how many copies exist, or how accurately the original is reproduced, it is still errant. Believers would be left without a sure foundation.

In discussing inspiration, inerrancy and the autographs, it is interesting that neither Jesus nor the apostles possessed the original Scriptures of the Old Testament, yet they would quote the Old Testament as authoritative. Clark Pinnock notes:

"The respect for the extant Old Testament text which Jesus and the Apostles held expresses their confidence in the providence of God which assured them that these copies and translations were indeed substantially identical to the inspired original" (*A Defense of Biblical Infallibility*, P. 16).

IX. Regarding 2 Peter 1:20-21

To be sure there is a human and a divine dimension to the communication of God's Word.

Doug Moo formerly of our own seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and now of Wheaton Graduate school, describes it this way:

"This human-divine interplay is called 'concurrence.' In this process, we believe, God prepared specific human beings, through birth, environment, etc., to communicate his word. These human beings genuinely spoke their own words. But the words they used were also just those words that God wanted them to use. Imbalance on this point is fatal. To deny the human element in Scripture is to ignore the reality of the individual personalities, writing styles, situations, etc., that make up much of the richness of God's Word. But to deny the divine element or to reduce it simply to a vague influence is to deprive the words of Scripture of their truthfulness and, therefore, ultimately, of their authority." (Moo, *2 Peter and Jude*, 85-86)

X. 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 pryings 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 "fleecing"): 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.

XI. 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 unwise-dom 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!

XII. 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 8:1 4 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 though 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 to seek 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 following 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 Standford'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 posturings of impure and improper desire. "He...teaches the humble His way" (Ps.25:9). Blessed, then, we may sat, are the pure in heart; for they shall know the will of God.

XIII. The Ministry of the Spirit in Discerning the Will of God

By: J.I. Packer

http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=3437

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—*paraklīto* [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 upbuilding: 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, boredom, 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 undoctrinal 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 suprarational 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 brain power. 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 rovings. 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 beggaring 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."⁹ 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.

End Notes

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 Elliot, *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.

XIV. 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!

This is powerfully reinforced by the apostle [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.** 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 the—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" [1 Cor 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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XV. 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 - 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 evangelicism 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. Middelmann 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

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

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. 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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XVII. 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*

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).

