

PERCEIVING GOD'S VOICE: WHAT CAN WE REASONABLY EXPECT TO EXPERIENCE WHEN GOD SPEAKS?

by

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The opinions expressed in this thesis do not necessarily reflect the views of the South African Theological Seminary.

Declaration

I hereby acknowledge that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted to any academic institution for degree purposes.

Hugh Ralph Goosen,
December 2013

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Abstract

Perceiving God's voice: what can we reasonably expect to experience when God speaks?

The aim of this practical-theological study is to investigate what the average Christian can reasonably expect to experience when God speaks. Given that vagueness exists amongst Christians with regards to what it is like to experience the voice of God practically, the study takes as its objectives the task of identifying objective criteria for the evaluation of religious experience as well as the offering of practical guidelines for the development of a discerning heart.

The study begins with a presentation of the findings of an empirical investigation into current perspectives amongst Christians from various denominations in the Muldersdrift area. The data that was gathered by means of both surveys and interviews is then further expounded upon in a biblical-theological analysis. Under consideration are differing perspectives on the will of God and its discoverability; the nature and purpose of divine communication; the levels of awareness and certainty of divine communication as evidenced by select biblical characters; the condition and role of the human spirit in discernment; the need for regular infilling as a prerequisite for effective discernment, environmental influences and practical exercises in preparation for discernment. The study concludes with a summary of the findings of the biblical-theological analysis, presented in the form of a study guide.

The results of the study show that while there are differences of opinion with regards to how Christians are to go about seeking divine guidance, the general consensus is that we should have, as our primary concern, a focus upon fostering a deep and intimate relationship with God, out of which direction and instruction will naturally and invariably flow. The ways in which Christians experience this direction, moreover, are as unique and varied as each individual relationship with God is unique and varied. The ultimate purpose of the study is fulfilled through the inspiration and facilitation of relationship-building as opposed to the presentation of a methodology for the divination of the will of God.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Introduction of the subject

Scripture reveals that God has spoken to His people in various ways throughout history. In the first verse of the epistle to the Hebrews, we read that in Old Testament times, God's primary method of communication was by means of the prophet (cf. Numbers 12:6; Deuteronomy 18:14-22; 2 Chronicles 36:15). According to Bryant (1993:476) Old Testament prophets were spokesmen for God. They 'were not interpreters of God's will; they uttered the actual words which God gave them.' Berkhof (2000:357) agrees that the three Hebrew words, namely, *nabhi*, *ro'eh* and *chozeh*, translated as 'prophet' were originally used to designate a person who received revelation from God and then relayed the message to the people. It was not God's intention, however, to relate to His people in such an impersonal, indirect fashion over the long term.

In this current Messianic era, inaugurated by the incarnation of Christ, God has spoken to believers by His Son (Hebrews 1:2). Moreover, as He promised through the prophet Ezekiel, God has undertaken to place His Holy Spirit within believers and to move their hearts to follow His decrees and to keep His laws (Ezekiel 36:26-27). Jesus pointed towards the fulfilment of this promise in John 16:13, assuring His disciples that the Holy Spirit would 'guide the people of God into all truth.' The apostle Paul confirms the fulfilment of this promise in his letter to the Philippian church, verifying that it is 'God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose' (Philippians 2:13). Therefore, unlike most Old Testament believers, Christians are capable of receiving direction from God both directly and personally (Romans 8:14; 12:2).

The research topic, therefore, is the human perception of the voice of God. In particular, I hope to identify what we, as modern believers, can reasonably expect to experience when the Holy Spirit communicates with us. The study is therefore practical-theological in nature and is geared towards the development of biblically verifiable tools that can be implemented practically to aid the believer in successfully differentiating between the voice of God and other possible competing voices.

1.2. Problem

Vagueness exists amongst Christians with regards to what they can reasonably expect to experience when God speaks. As Graham Cole (2007:276) explains, ‘the rhetoric Evangelicals, Charismatics and Pentecostals use to articulate Christian experience...is fundamentally misleading because it is left unnuanced and unexplained.’ Problems arise, furthermore, ‘from rhetoric that suggests that speaking to God and God speaking to us is just like relating to a friend.’ When phrases such as ‘the Lord spoke to me,’ or ‘the Lord told me’ are used, the opportunity for assumption immediately presents itself. Because we are accustomed to using such terminology with individuals who are embodied, visible and audible, our assumptions can be skewed. Moreover, our attempts at learning to perceive the voice of God will be governed by and negatively impacted by these assumptions and preconceptions.

Perhaps, as Karkkainen (2008:14) suggests, we err when we begin to base our expectations upon what we assume others to have experienced instead of resigning ourselves to the fact that ‘the experience of the Holy Spirit is as specific as the living beings who experience the Spirit, and as varied as the living beings who experience the Spirit are varied.’ Nevertheless, the believer who desires to improve his openness and sensitivity towards the guidance of the Holy Spirit finds himself at a disadvantage when he does not know what to look for. As such, I agree with Willard (1999:187), who states that the hearing of God’s voice must be taken ‘out of the realm of superstition or mere guesswork and put in terms that everyone who wants

to understand can understand.’ The elimination of guesswork regarding the perception of the voice of God is the objective of this study.

1.3. Objectives

The objectives of this study include the development of (A) objective criteria that can be used practically to evaluate religious experience and (B) practical guidelines for the development of a discerning heart.

1.3.1. Objective criteria for the evaluation of religious experience

I agree with Bockmeuhl (1990:124-145) and Pinnock (1996:233-234), who assert that Christians need to be able to find a healthy balance between a too-controlled objectivity and an uncontrolled subjectivity. We may be spiritual beings but we cannot function apart from our cognition. We need to be capable of consciously identifying and evaluating an experience for it to be of any value to us. As such, I also agree with Johnson (1977:2), who states that there are ‘guidelines to which all spiritual experiences should and must conform.’

For Dallas Willard (1999:174), there are three factors that enable us to identify God’s voice. In terms of quality, it carries the weight of authority. In terms of spirit, it bears the characteristics of ‘exalted peacefulness and confidence, of joy, of sweet reasonableness and of goodwill’ (1999:177). In terms of content, God’s communication will always be consistent with the truth of Scripture. Michael Welker (1994:336) similarly explains that wherever the Spirit of God acts, there is an experience of liberation and freedom, of transformation and renewal, of righteousness and peace. Both Willard and Welker provide their readers with some examples of the sort of objective criteria that might prove helpful for the person trying to perceive the voice of God. Indeed, as Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:97) suggests, without clear criteria for discernment, ‘there is no true capacity to discern.’

1.3.2. Practical guidelines for the development of a discerning heart

Pinnock (1996:13) explains that although the Scriptures provide us with definite clues for understanding, we can never master the subject of the Holy Spirit rationally. Rather, we get to know the Holy Spirit experientially, through prayer and Bible study. Willard (1999:167-169) likewise proposes that those regenerate who have taken the time to renew their minds according to the truth of Scripture and have experimented, quietly waiting upon the Lord, practicing to hear Him, 'can learn by experience to hear God as He speaks.' Moreover, 'with assistance from those who understand the divine voice...we can come to recognize the voice of God without great difficulty.'

Improvement in terms of one's ability to perceive the voice of God will invariably have a positive effect upon the quality of one's relationship with God. The development of a quality relationship with God is what I believe to be our ultimate purpose (Matthew 6:33). As a review of key literary resources reveals, there are a number of contributors who likewise consider a healthy and intimate relationship to be imperative for true discernment.

1.4. Literature review

Louis Berkhof (2000:29-40) explains that while the invisible God is transcendent and incomprehensible, He is also imminent and can be known, albeit imperfectly, through various means. These include His general and special revelation of Himself to mankind as well as the illuminating influence of the Holy Spirit. To a large extent, scholarly opinions regarding the subject of the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit are offered under consideration of the topic of the will of God. In his invaluable resource entitled 'How then should we choose?' Huffman (2009) identifies the different schools of thought on decision making and the will of God. For Huffman, there are three major perspectives, including the traditional or specific-will view, the wisdom view and the relationship view. There is also a fourth view, aptly named the centrist perspective, as it borrows something from each of the three major views. In addition to these, James C. Petty (1999) introduces a fifth perspective, one he refers

to as the traditional-charismatic view. These categorisations, I believe, go a long way towards clarifying the differences of opinion regarding divine guidance.

1.4.1. The traditional or specific will view

The traditional view is aptly named because it is the perspective that is most commonly held by Christians today (Petty 1999:29). As Garry Friesen (2004:35) explains, the traditional understanding is that God has a specific will for each individual, that His will can be discovered, and that it is the responsibility of the believer to seek and obey it. The believer goes about seeking the will of God by 'interpreting the inner impressions and outward signs through which the Holy Spirit communicates His leading.' The most common external sources for guidance that believers are encouraged to consider include the Bible, a combination of circumstances, mature counsel and common sense. For the intents and purposes of this study, however, it is important to note that proponents of this perspective emphasise inner promptings (also commonly referred to as impressions, the inner witness and the still, small voice) as revelatory and reliable sources for guidance (Petty 1999:31).

From the variety of contemporary authors that write from a traditional perspective, both Huffman (2009) and Friesen (2004:426) consider contributions by Henry and Richard Blackaby to be of the most authoritative. In 'How then should we choose?' (Huffman 2009), the Blackabys provide a condensed yet scholarly version of their argument to be found in the more commercial rendering entitled 'Hearing God's voice' (Blackaby and Blackaby 2002). The Blackabys (ed. Huffman 2009:33) contend that God speaks all the time but that most Christians 'are just not sure how to recognize His voice.' The authors do an admiral job, however, of providing some practical ways in which the modern believer can overcome this obstacle. Particularly noteworthy are their methods for meditation (2002:108), guidelines for the evaluation of circumstances (2002:157), ways to distinguish between the Holy Spirit, Satan and

self (2002:ch9) and their suggestion that all divine guidance is given within the framework of God's redemptive purposes (2008:44).

Another significant contributor towards this perspective is Jack Deere. His works, 'Surprised by the power of the Spirit' and the subsequent 'Surprised by the voice of God,' are highly acclaimed by Friesen (2004:432) as being a 'convincing theology of the miraculous in the church.' Given his background as a conservative cessationist professor of theology at the Dallas Theological Seminary, the account of Deere's conversion to the traditional view is indeed compelling. His main thesis is that the modern believer should be capable of hearing the voice of God, both within and outside of the Scriptures, through direct supernatural communication (1996:66). Deere (1996:ch5) suggests that this kind of sensitivity towards the voice of God was not uncommon, even in post-apostolic times. He supports his contentions by pointing to the experiences of reformers such as George Wishart, John Knox, John Welsh, Robert Bruce and Alexander Peden.

Worth noting is the enormous popularity of Jeanne Guyon's (1999:144) work on how God can be experienced intimately through the 'continual prayer of silence.' The demand for her outlawed work suggests that seventeenth century believers certainly thirsted for a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit. For Deere (1996:90), however, the reason why believers are not more sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit is because their experience forbids it. Our experience – our perception of what is normal and what is possible – dictates our expectation. Thought provoking is Deere's (1996:390) contention that we should not need a set of complicated rules or formulas to recognise the voice of a friend. Rather, we become sensitive to the voice of God as we practice hearing Him.

Also worth mentioning as we consider writings from this perspective are the practically-oriented contributions of Morton Kelsey. In his two works entitled 'Encounter with God' and 'The other side of silence,' Kelsey (1987 and 1997) proposes a spiritual methodology which incorporates a working understanding of Jungian depth psychology as well as some practical elements of Eastern meditation.

He proposes that believers render themselves more open to a spiritual encounter when they practice silence and introversion and exercise the faculty of the imagination during prayer and study. While most believers would agree that much can be gained from meditation – we are encouraged to meditate on the Scriptures day and night (Joshua 1:8) – I expect that many would ask where the line should be drawn between healthy contemplation and mysticism.

1.4.2. *The wisdom view*

In ‘Decision making and the will of God,’ an outworking of his doctoral dissertation on the same subject, Garry Friesen (2004) presents the most thorough and convincing argument against the traditional view of guidance available today. Huffman (2009) states that Friesen’s work caused a ‘significant stir amongst Evangelicals when it was published in 1980’ and it is not surprising that he was selected to represent the ‘way of wisdom’ in ‘How then should we choose?’ Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:102) summarises the wisdom perspective in four principles:

1. Where God commands, we must obey
2. Where there is no command, God gives us freedom (and responsibility) to choose
3. Where there is no command, God gives us wisdom to choose
4. When we have chosen what is moral and wise, we must trust the sovereign God to work all the details together for good

These principles suggest that for those who embrace the way of wisdom, all that is required for guidance is comprehensively revealed in Scripture (Friesen 2004:120). God does not have a specific will for individuals apart from His sovereign decretive will (Petty 1999:57). Christians facing morally neutral decisions are free and responsible to choose between two or more equally good options. The idea that we have all probably ‘missed God’s best’ and should be consciously working towards getting as close as we possibly can back to Plan A is a horrendous misconception (Petty 1999 and 2003). The believer should not be burdened by a preoccupation to

discern the will of God in every decision but should rather strive to develop a 'moral skill to understand and apply the commandments of God to situations and people' (Petty 1999:144).

Proponents of the wisdom view do not, like Deere, suggest that we need to reconsider our perspective if we are to change our experience. Rather, it is suggested that if the traditional view is correct, there can only be one explanation when a person fails to effectively discern the will of God: the person is spiritually defective (Friesen 2004:39). This is an exceedingly hard pill to swallow for many sincere believers who simply have not been able to enjoy the type of spiritual sensitivity that the traditional view suggests one should be capable of enjoying. It is important to note that proponents of the wisdom view do not out-rightly discount the authenticity and value of subjective impressions. What they suggest is that impressions are not revelatory or authoritative (Friesen 2004:92). They consider hunches or impressions to be providential input and not revelation (Petty 1999:173). Consequently, impressions can be more fully enjoyed because they do not carry with them the risk of misinterpretation.

1.4.3. The relationship view

Gordon T. Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:170), the third contributor to 'How then should we choose?' argues that while the wisdom approach seems to provide some concrete answers to the dilemma, the decision making process is turned into an objective intellectual exercise that quenches the Spirit and leaves almost no room for the omnipotent and dynamic Spirit of God to work. He argues furthermore that while proponents of the specific will view are receptive to the Spirit, they 'do not have an effective approach to discerning whether something was truly from God.' The fundamental issue for Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:178) is not whether God has a will and whether His will is to be discovered but whether or not there is a relationship of intimacy and communion that makes possible the knowledge of the will of God.

He provides an overview of the contributions of Origen of Alexandria, Bernard of Clairvaux, Ignatius Loyola and John Wesley and suggests that there is a ‘distinctive “tradition,” a thread that runs through the spiritual heritage and collected wisdom of the spiritual masters’ (ed. Huffman 2009:198). The common thread is that an immediate relationship with Christ is paramount. I am reminded here again of the classic Christ-focused work penned by fifteenth century author Thomas à Kempis (2004) who proposed that the complete renouncement of self, coupled with a focus upon imitating Christ, will invariably render the Christian almost unconsciously inclined to be led by the Spirit and to live a life compliant with the will of God. For Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:198), though, the obvious conclusion is that we can learn how to be ‘attentive to Christ, as an immediate experience and as a dynamic of our Christian experience.’ The Christian experience is never generic – each believer must discern how the general principles of Scripture ‘apply and hold sway in his or her particular situation’ (ed. Huffman 2009:178).

1.4.4. Centrist perspectives

It appears as though there are many writers who don’t quite fit into a particular camp. Huffman (2009:240) suggests that the three categorisations are all a little too tidy because there are a number of writers who adopt elements from a variety of perspectives. For Huffman (2009:254), J.I. Packer’s contributions, for example, show evidence of both traditional and wisdom influences. For me, in his classic work, ‘Knowing God,’ Packer (2004:267) seems to lean predominantly towards the wisdom view when he states that it is a mistake ‘to think of guidance as essentially inward prompting by the Holy Spirit, apart from the written Word.’ Rather, the most fundamental way in which our ‘rational Creator guides His rational creatures is by rational understanding and application of His written Word.’

Dallas Willard (1999) adopts traditional, wisdom and relational aspects in his work entitled ‘Hearing God: Developing a conversational relationship with God.’ Willard (1999:109) suggests, along with other traditionalists, that the recognition of the voice

of God can only come through practice and experimentation. Supporters of the wisdom camp, however, might better relate to his contention that God can only communicate with us through our conscious rational minds, 'for they are the substance of our lives' (Willard 1999:102). For me, however, Willard probably best advocates the relational view because he constantly recommends that the focus should be upon developing a personal and intimate relationship with the Creator.

1.4.5. The gift-focused traditional-charismatic view

One final and additional perspective, which is vitally important to our chosen topic, is one that Petty (1999:32) refers to as the traditional-charismatic view. He suggests that the traditional-charismatic position picks up where the traditional view leaves off. Proponents of this view differentiate between inner impressions, which are to be considered non-revelatory and non-authoritative and spiritual 'word gifts,' especially prophecy, which can be both revelatory and authoritative. This distinction is key because if the source of the knowledge is subjective then the knowledge itself is subjective and uncertain and the Christian should not feel pressured to discern (Friesen 2004:92). Prophecy, however, is something objective that comes from outside of us. The source of the knowledge is God Himself.

As Grudem (2000:ch5) defines it in his refreshing work entitled 'The gift of prophecy,' prophecy is the 'speaking of merely human words to report something that God has brought spontaneously to mind.' For the traditional-charismatic view, the discussion moves away from inward impressions that all Christians are encouraged to 'somehow try and interpret' to a consideration of the gift of prophecy, 'which all people should be encouraged to seek but do not all have' (Grudem 2000:ch10). This perspective is immensely liberating because it accepts that the Holy Spirit gives gifts to individuals as He wills and so the initiative lies with Him (1 Corinthians 12:7-11). Moreover, as Grudem (2000:99) reveals, the Christian is further liberated by the fact that if the gift of prophecy is given, the 'revelation' will be undeniably recognisable.

An invaluable contribution on the subject of the gifts of the Holy Spirit would be, 'Are miraculous gifts for today?' edited by Wayne Grudem (1996). This resource provides four different perspectives on the topic of the continuation or cessation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. On behalf of those of a cessationist persuasion, Gaffin (ed. Grudem 1996:41) argues that the 'revelatory' or 'word gifts' have ceased. These gifts include prophecy and its assessment, tongues and interpretation, words of knowledge and words of wisdom (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-31, and Ephesians 4:11). The three remaining arguments presented are all variations of a non-cessationist perspective. In his concluding remarks, Grudem (1996:342) states that all four contributors agree that the Holy Spirit guides his people but that 'more study is needed on how the Holy Spirit uses our impressions and feelings in this matter.'

This literature review has illustrated how differing perspectives on God's will and decision making influence opinions regarding the topic of subjective divine guidance. It has shown that for those of the traditional camp, inner impressions are considered to be revelatory and authoritative and a part of everyday life. Believers need to learn how to be attentive to them and to differentiate between impressions that are from God and impressions that are from a person's own subconscious. Standing opposed to the traditional folk are those who hold to the wisdom view. They assert that impressions are real and may even point the way to wisdom but do not feel that impressions are revelatory or authoritative. They argue, furthermore, that decisions should not be made on the basis of subjective feelings alone, apart from the wisdom we acquire from Scripture. The third perspective is the relationship view, which asserts that we should be focused less upon trying to discern the will of God and focused more upon fostering an intimate and immediate relationship with Him. We are sanctified to be more like Christ through prayer and study and contemplation. Over time, we attain the mind of Christ and become almost conditioned to immediately know what the right course of action would be for any given decision. Finally, there is an additional perspective called the traditional-charismatic view, which shifts the focus from subjective divine guidance to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. By doing this, the believer does not discount the relevance and value of subjective

impressions but alleviates the pressure to always have to try and decide which impression came from where. Nevertheless, as Grudem (1994:128) remarks, God still makes use of 'subjective impressions of His will to remind and encourage us and often to prompt our thoughts in the right direction.' They are a vital part of our Christian lives and we need to try and understand them as best as we possibly can.

1.5. Purpose of the study

It is my contention that God's ultimate purpose for creating mankind was because He wants a family, comprised of Christ-like individuals, whom He has personal and intimate relationships with (1 John 3:1-3). The purpose of this study is to facilitate this ultimate divine purpose of relationship by providing practical tools for the improvement of our ability to perceive God's voice.

1.5.1. Relationship the ultimate purpose

In his thesis entitled 'A Pauline theology of the believer's experience of God,' Johnson (1977:2) reveals that the apostle Paul emphasised a relational rather than an intellectual or experiential spirituality. His focus was upon the obedient fulfilment of spiritual responsibilities and goals with respect to the Word, the Spirit and Christ, the result of which would be a healthy and mature spiritual state.

Jürgen Moltmann (2001:218) likewise suggests that the Holy Spirit is fellowship oriented (2 Corinthians 13:14) and is far less interested in instructing us as He is in engaging in a relationship with us. He adds that the common denominator and the key for successful communication between the believer and the Holy Spirit is a mutual interest in the glorification of Christ (John 16:14). The Spirit speaks when action is taken to glorify Christ in the individual (sanctification), the church (edification) and the world (evangelisation). I agree with Moltmann when he recommends a change of perspective. Instead of waiting upon God for direction and

instruction, we should be trying to cultivate an ongoing, healthy relationship with God, out of which direction and instruction will naturally and invariably flow.

1.6. Research methodology

The research design is based upon Michael Cowan's (2000) LIM model. For Cowan, all practical-theological research must be transformative, with a focus upon (1) an interpretation of the situation as it is, (2) an interpretation of the situation as it should be, and (3) an interpretation of our contemporary obligations.

1.6.1. Empirical investigation into the current situation

The study begins with an empirical investigation into what the average Christian believes regarding the research topic. I conducted field research amongst four churches within the Muldersdrift area. Focusing upon one church at a time, I gathered my data by means of two research instruments – interviews and questionnaires. After interviewing at least one leader from each of the four churches, I worked together with each respective leader to encourage members of the laity to complete a questionnaire. The two research instruments requested exactly the same information from all of the respondents. The instruments worked together to identify topics requiring of further attention in the biblical-theological analysis to follow.

1.6.2. Biblical-theological study of the preferred scenario

The second phase of the research process addresses the actual research problem by means of a thorough biblical-theological study. By establishing what the preferred scenario should be, I answer the research question: what can we reasonably expect to experience when God speaks? After weighing the results of the empirical study against the results of the biblical-theological study, I was able to identify areas where some practical recommendations could be made to improve the current situation.

1.6.3. *Practical suggestions to improve the current situation*

The study concludes with some practical recommendations for change and growth, presented in the form of a study guide. I believe that this resource has the potential for constructive use in seminars and conferences, classrooms, Bible study meetings and home cell groups. This study guide will hopefully go a long way towards eliminating vagueness with regards to what Christians can expect to experience when God speaks by:

1. Identifying the variety of ways in which God speaks in modern times
2. Providing objective criteria for the evaluation of religious experience
3. Providing practical suggestions and exercises for the development of a discerning heart

Chapter 2

Current expectations

To establish what the average Christian expects to experience when God speaks, I elected to conduct an empirical study of Christians within my community. I drew my sample of respondents from four churches in the Muldersdrift area. The four churches included: (1) Foresight Church (Third Wave); (2) Muldersdrift Union Church (Independent Evangelical); (3) the NG Muldersdrift (Dutch Reformed), and (4) Community Ministries Muldersdrift (Pentecostal-Charismatic). The narrowing of my focus to this specific geographic location was not an exercise in convenience sampling but a considered decision that seemed practical for a number of reasons.

My research topic is personal and subjective in nature. It deals with delicate issues, some of which may be inclined towards eliciting reserved and noncommittal responses. With this in mind, I felt that a large scale quantitative research exercise would be relatively ineffectual in yielding the right kind of information. I was concerned less with 'how many people believe what' than I was with 'what it is that people actually believe.' My research instruments therefore had to be qualitative.

A focus upon a small geographic location would facilitate research of such a personal, qualitative nature. It would alleviate some of the challenges that a sample selection process in a larger geographical area would present. The risk of self-selection bias would be eliminated. Moreover, the richness and diversity of denominational perspectives in Muldersdrift would ensure that the responses would be random yet balanced, offering a fair and impartial picture of reality. I decided to make use of two research instruments to gather my data: a qualitatively-orientated questionnaire, prepared for the laity, and interviews, which I would conduct personally with leaders from each of the respective churches.

2.1. Questionnaire

My first research instrument was a questionnaire. I drafted the questions and conducted a pilot study to ensure the suitability of the questions. I petitioned two ministers and ten laypeople from varying denominational backgrounds to vet the questions for suitability and I amended the questions according to recommendations received. The final product was lengthy and I realised that the combination of quantitative and qualitative questions would render the questionnaire less effective than the interviews in yielding measurable and verifiable information. This was not a concern, however, because this qualitatively-orientated instrument would serve its purpose: it would help me to identify areas of concern, which would be requiring of further investigation in the chapters to follow.

One church at a time, I worked together with the leaders of each of the churches to have as many questionnaires filled out as possible. The respondents were encouraged not to labour over the questions and to leave out any questions that they struggled to understand or were uncomfortable with. They were also guaranteed anonymity and were left to answer as they chose. Of an approximate one hundred and fifty questionnaires that were distributed, sixty-two were returned. The results serve to (1) confirm the research problem and (2) reaffirm the objectives of the study.

2.1.1. Problem investigation and confirmation

A number of questions in the survey were specifically geared towards the investigation of the research problem: what do people actually expect to experience when God speaks? These questions might be logically organised into the following categories: (1) awareness of divine communication, (2) certainty of divine communication and (3) the nature and purpose of divine communication. The results support Cole's (2007:276) contention that vagueness does exist amongst believers with regards to what they can reasonably expect to experience when God speaks.

2.1.1.1 Awareness of divine communication

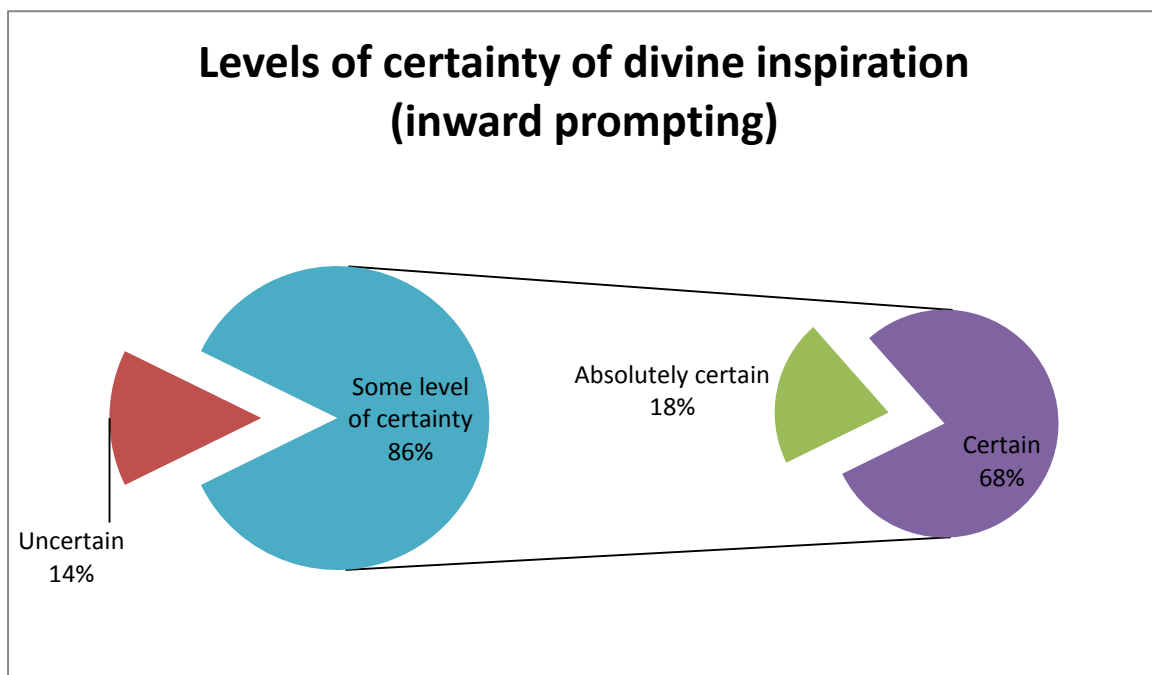
In marketing, it is understood that there are a series of events that occur when a person engages with an advertisement: awareness, interest, desire and action (AIDA). This well-known sales acronym supports the communications theory that 'attention must be gained before a message can be delivered' (Egan 2007:43). The first point of interest, therefore, was to investigate the level of awareness that people expect to experience when God speaks. I asked the respondents how likely they think it is that God may be guiding them on a regular basis through inward promptings but that they are simply unaware of it. As the chart below indicates, the staggering majority of the respondents believe it possible that they may be oblivious to the guidance that the Holy Spirit provides.

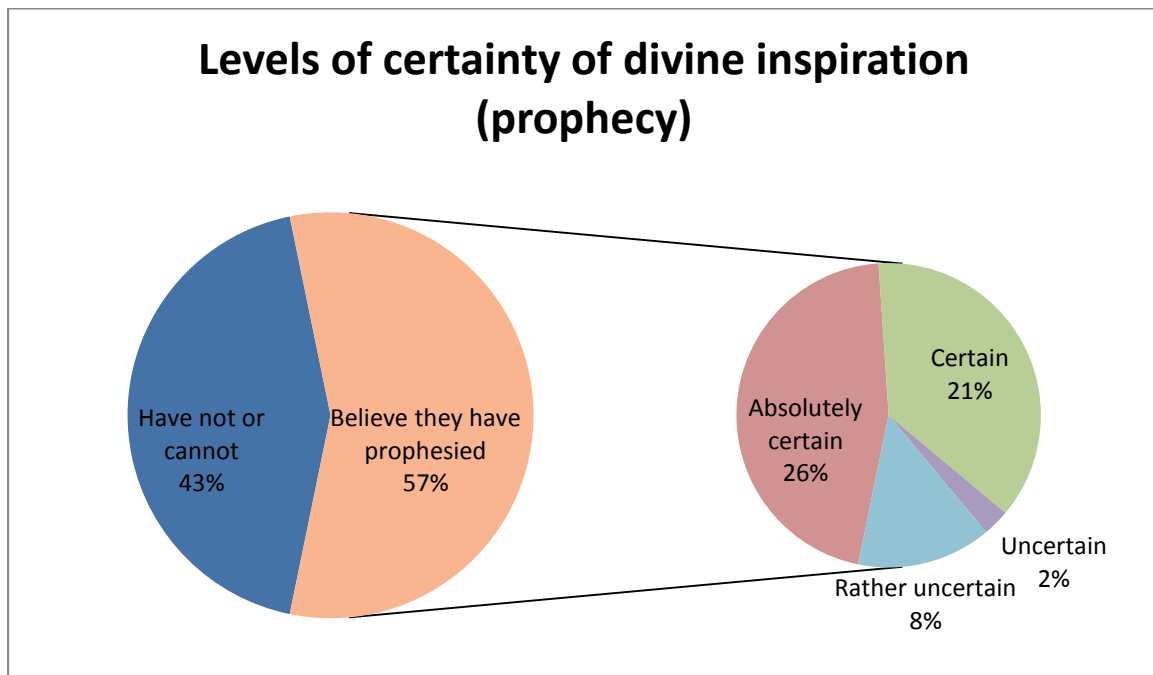


2.1.1.2. Certainty of divine communication

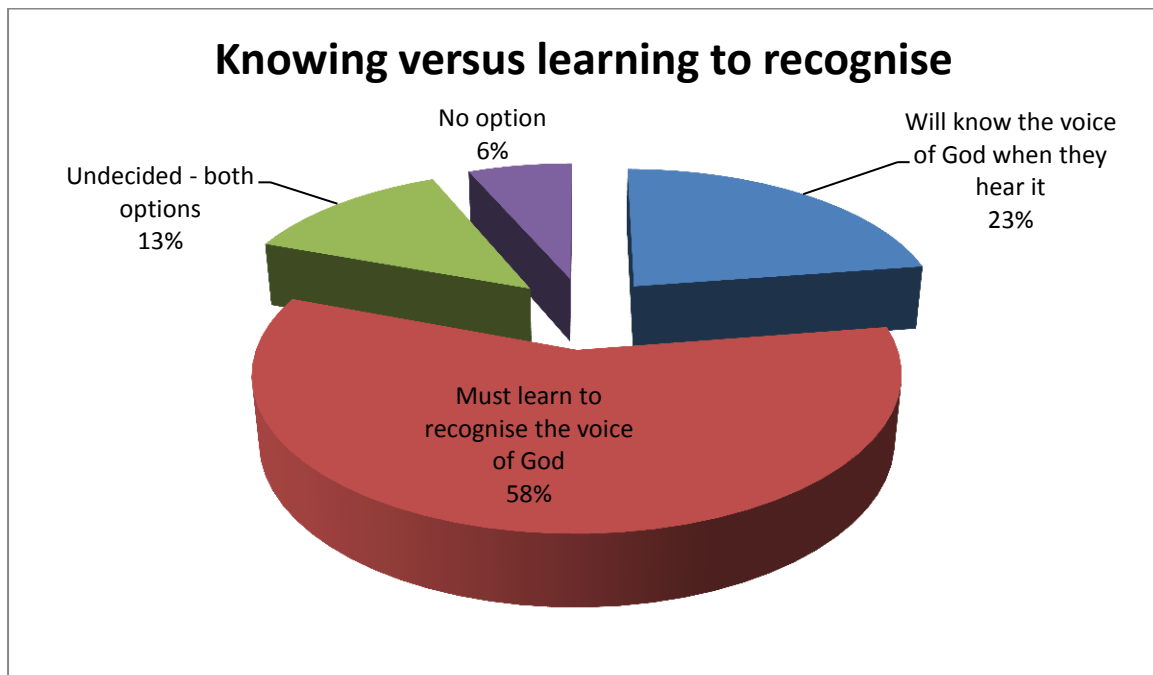
My second concern was the level of certainty that people expect to experience when God speaks. I wanted to know if the average person expects to recognise the voice of God when they hear it and not confuse it with something else. I sought answers to

these concerns firstly by enquiring about two possible vehicles of divine communication: inward promptings and the spiritual gift of prophecy. Based upon a recent instance where they believe the Holy Spirit to have given them an inward prompting, I asked the respondents to indicate how certain they were that the prompting was of divine origin and not merely a product of their own imagination. I also asked those who believe that they have prophesied before to indicate their level of certainty of divine inspiration. As the charts reveal, certainty levels proved to be quite high.



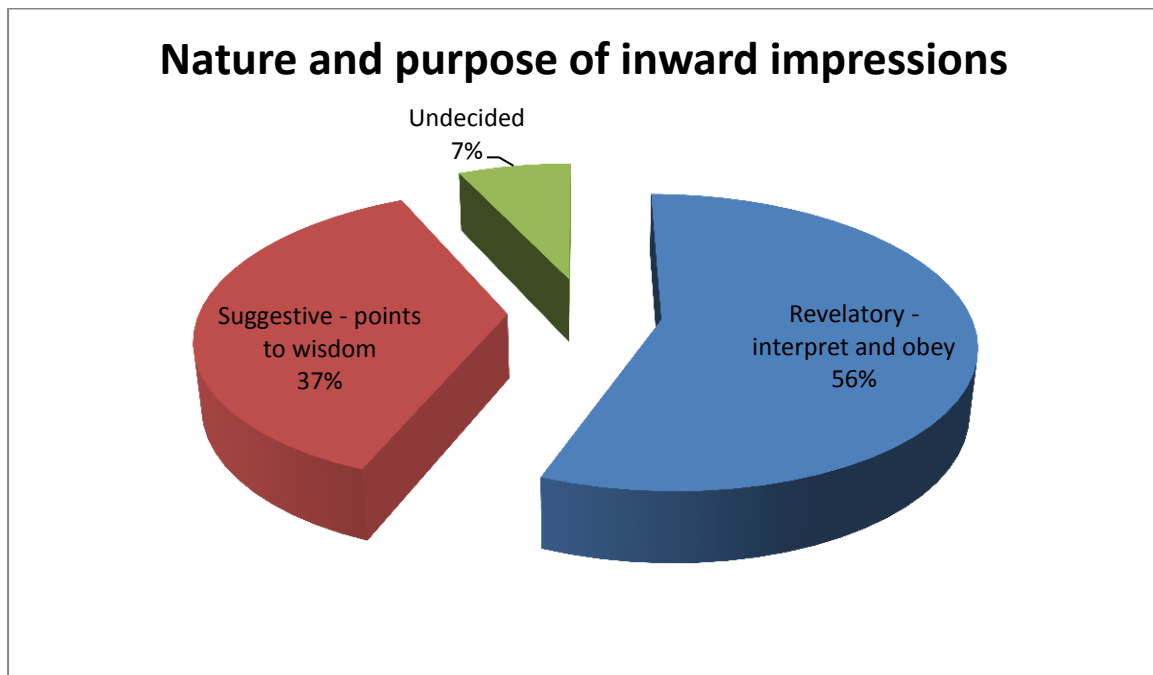


To further investigate this topic, I also asked the respondents if they thought that one must learn to recognise and know the voice of God or if one will simply and definitely know the voice of God when one hears it. Interestingly enough, even though many of the respondents were quite certain that their last religious experience was divinely inspired, many of them opted in favour of discernment as a learned skill.



2.1.1.3. The nature and purpose of divine communication

My third point of interest was to move beyond a simple awareness of divine communication to investigate what the experience of the divine voice is actually like. A person proficient in discernment must, by experience, know something of the nature and purpose of divine communication. I narrowed the focus of this enquiry down to one vehicle of communication that even many cessationists would deem to be valid: the inward prompting of the Holy Spirit. I asked the respondents if they considered inward promptings to be revelatory and requiring of proper interpretation and obedience or if they are merely helpful suggestions that serve to point the way towards the wisest course of action. The results suggest that there is strong support for both perspectives.



I believe that the participants' responses in these three categories support Cole's (2007:276) opinion that there are Christians who are uncertain about what they can expect to experience when God speaks. Respondents who believe that they may be consistently oblivious to the regular inward prompting of the Holy Spirit certainly cannot have a very clear understanding of what to expect when He prompts. Varying levels of certainty regarding previous religious experiences likewise suggest that expectations must differ quite significantly from one respondent to the next. It is worth noting, furthermore, that if we are all indeed required to learn to discern, then novices must surely have a foggier sense of expectation than those who are more advanced in the art of discernment. The need for clarification on the topic of expectation is reiterated finally by the fact that the respondents are quite clearly divided over the nature and purpose of inward impressions.

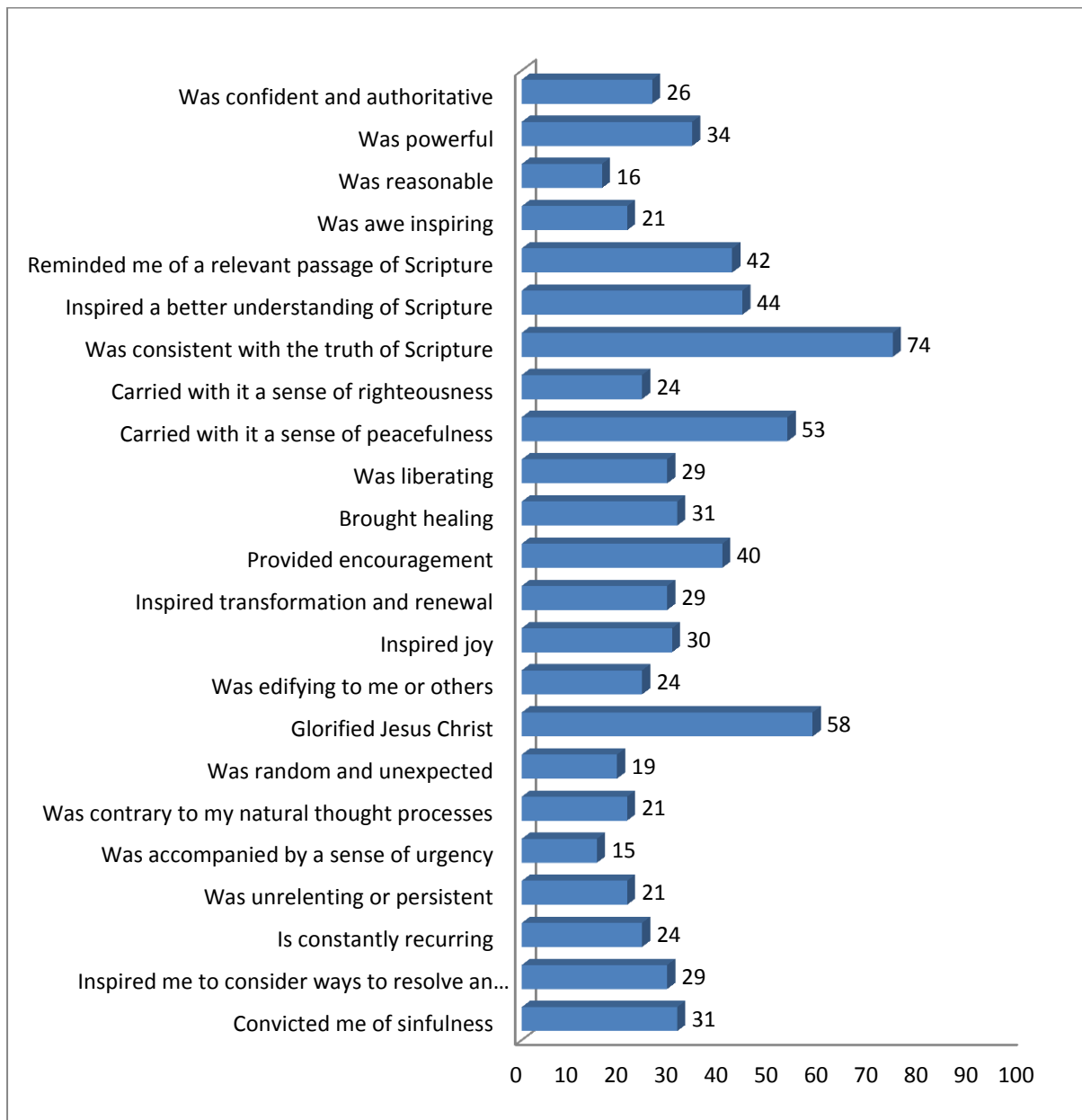
2.1.2. Objectives reaffirmed

Besides asking questions that related to the research problem, I also asked questions that dealt more specifically with the objectives of the study. The focus shifts from the reception of the divine message to the processing of and appropriate

response to the divine message. These questions can also be logically organised according to the two key objectives of the study: (1) the objective evaluation of a divine message, and (2) practical guidelines for growth in discernment.

2.1.2.1. Objective criteria to evaluate religious experience

I sought to understand how a person moves from the point where they become aware of something to the point where they enjoy some level of certainty of its inspiration. I therefore asked the respondents if they could identify any objective criteria that characterised the religious experiences they have had. I provided them with a list of possible criteria and encouraged them to mark as many as seemed appropriate. If I could single out some common, recurring criteria, perhaps those criteria could serve as tell-tale signs of the influence of the Holy Spirit. While the results suggest that all of the possible criteria are relevant, there were a handful of criteria that found more support than others. More than half of the respondents singled out three specific criteria that commonly contributed towards a conviction of the divine inspiration of an experience. These included 'consistency with the truth of Scripture,' a 'sense of peacefulness,' and 'the glorification of Jesus Christ.'

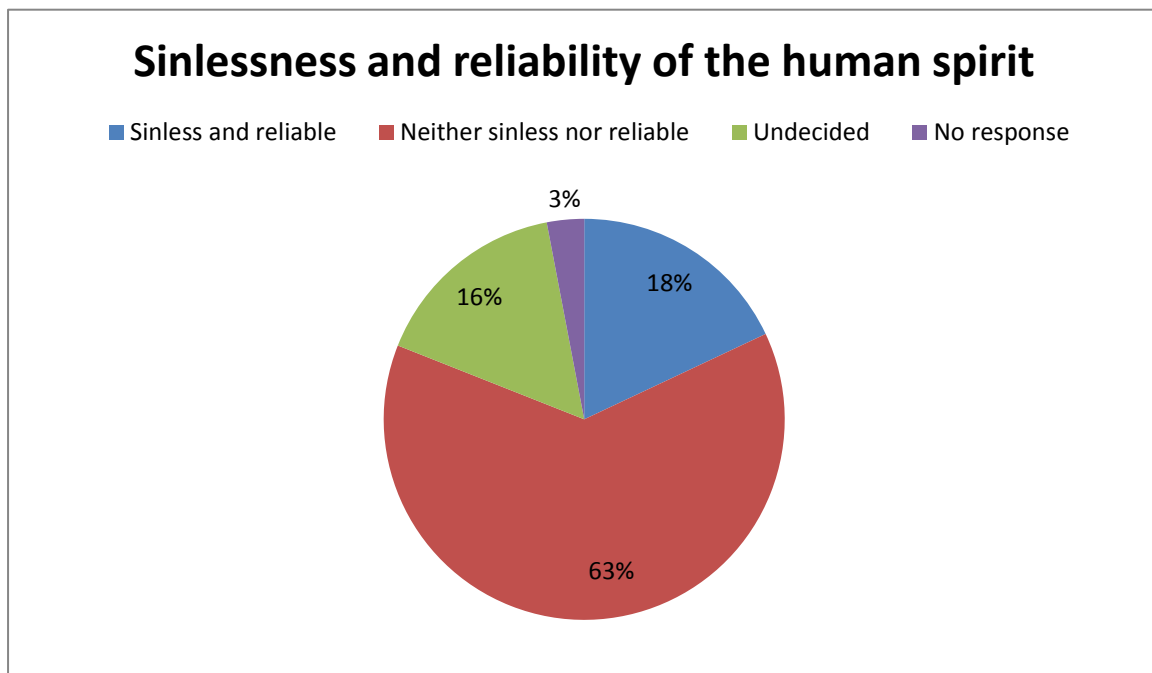


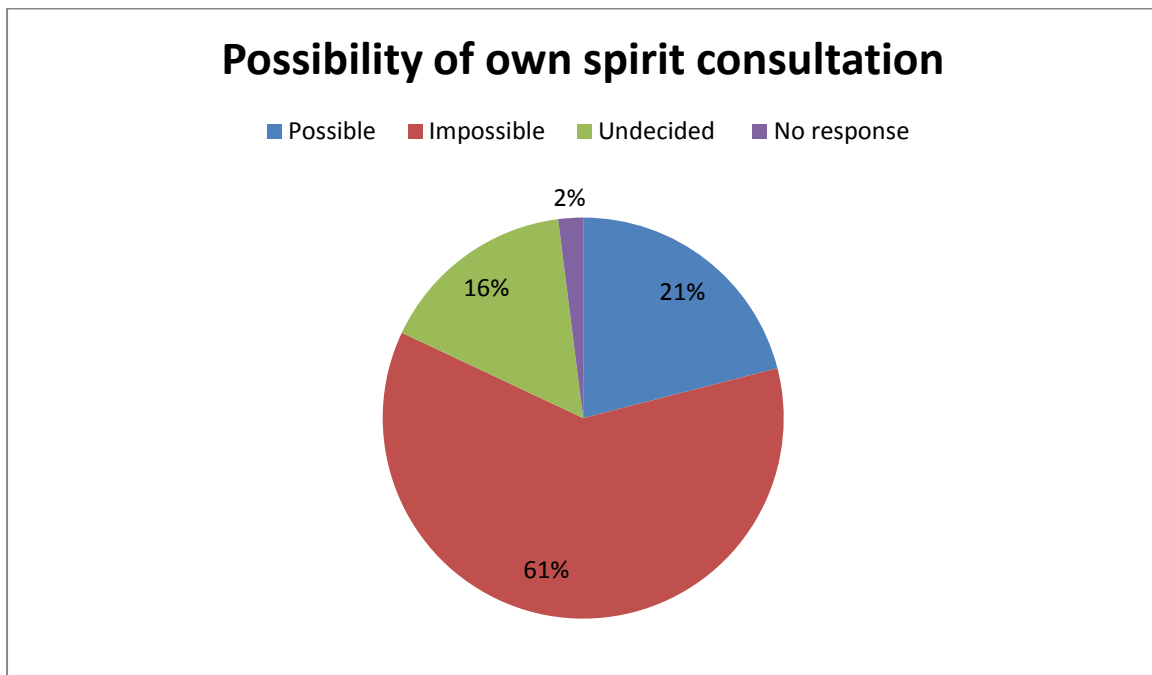
2.1.2.2. Guidelines for the development of a discerning heart

Besides the actual evaluation of a religious experience, I sought to establish if there are any practical things that one can do to prepare oneself for the task of discernment. To be taken into consideration were a variety of factors that influence one's ability to discern, such as the condition and role of the human spirit, the need for infilling and one's environment.

2.1.2.2.1. Condition and role of the human spirit

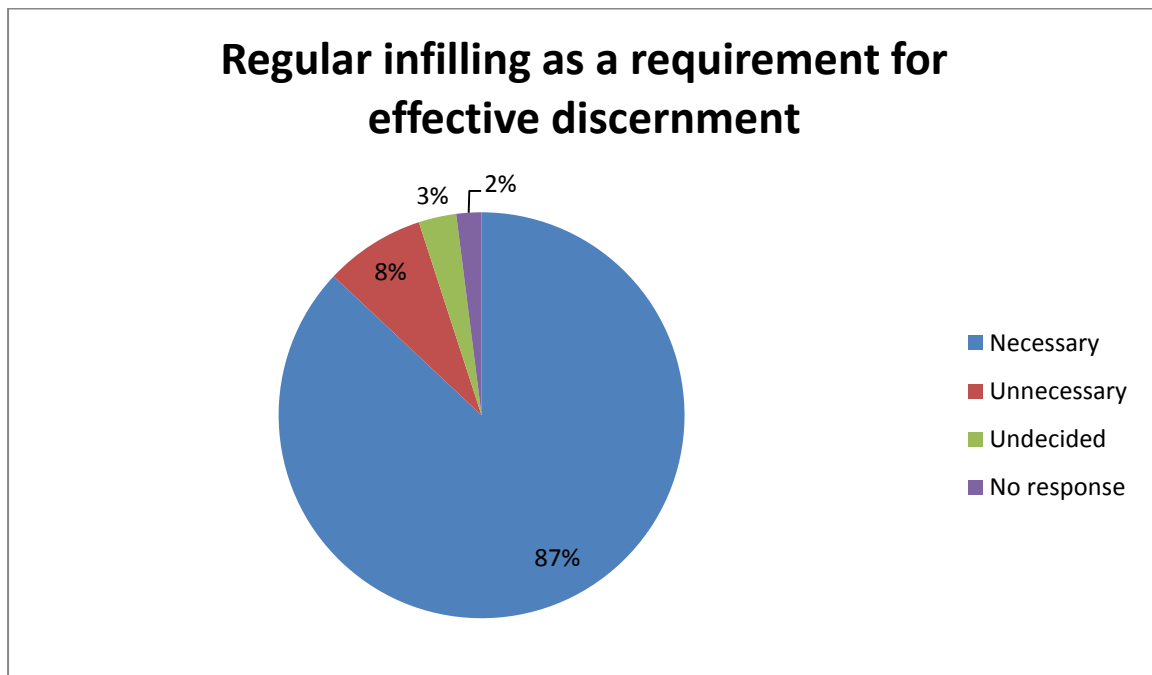
I explained to the respondents that some authors recommend that you ‘consult your spirit’ when making decisions. This, I added, is because of a belief that the spirit of a Christian has been ‘regenerated’ or ‘enlivened’ by the Holy Spirit and is therefore sinless and totally reliable as a guide. Certainly, such a belief would seriously impact the way in which one goes about seeking divine guidance practically. I therefore asked the respondents if they consider the regenerate human spirit to be sinless and reliable as a guide. I asked them, furthermore, if they think that it is actually possible to consult one’s own spirit. While a number of respondents were hesitant to answer, there was a significant portion of the respondents who made definitive choices.





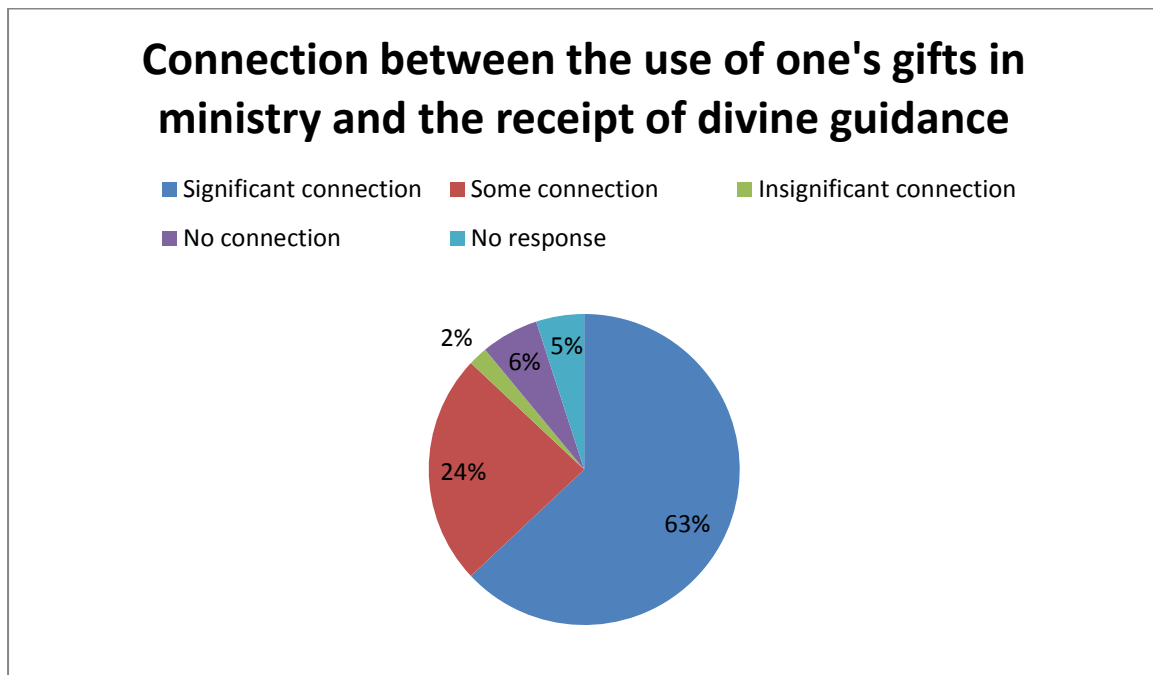
2.1.2.2.2. Regular infilling as a necessary requirement for effective discernment

I showed the respondents that the apostle Paul suggested in Ephesians 5:8 that Christians should be regularly 'filled with the Holy Spirit.' I then asked the respondents if they felt that regular infilling with the Holy Spirit renders a person more inclined to receive and accurately discern divine guidance. The responses show that there are respondents who are uncertain about the effect that regular infilling will have upon their ability to discern. There are respondents, furthermore, who believe that regular infilling does not necessarily render a person more inclined to accurately discern.



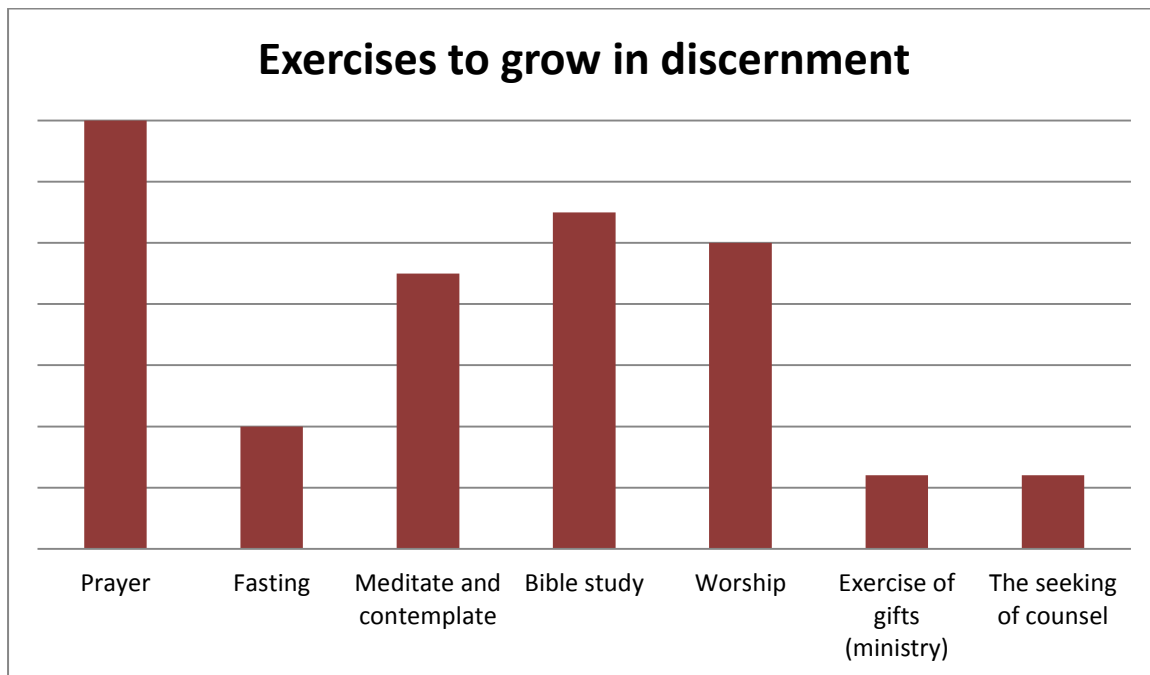
2.1.2.2.3. Environment

Roman Catholic theologians would argue that ‘we have not found all that God says to us about any particular subject until we have also listened to the official teaching of the church throughout its history’ (Grudem 1994:129). Even within the Reformed tradition, it is common for Christians to consult local church leaders for spiritual counsel in times of choice. I was curious to investigate how common is the belief that God is more inclined to communicate with those who are in ministry than with those who are not. I showed the respondents from 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 that the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to people as He pleases and for the common good or the edification of the body of Christ. I then asked them how much of a connection they believe there is between actively using one’s gifts in ministry and the receipt of divine guidance.



2.1.2.2.4. *Practical exercises in preparation*

Jesus suggested to His disciples that there is a connection between prayer and spiritual effectiveness (Mark 9:29). Ignatius of Loyola (1914:12) likewise suggested that as we examine our conscience, meditate, contemplate, pray and perform other spiritual actions, we 'dispose the soul to rid itself of all the disordered tendencies, and, after its rid, to seek the Divine Will.' It was imperative that I investigate what exercises the average Christian considered to be beneficial in preparation for the task of discernment. I listed a number of activities commonly associated with the seeking of divine guidance and asked the respondents to rate the activities from most to least important. The graph below serves to indicate the general level of propensity towards one activity over another.



Once again, I believe that the responses to these questions serve to reaffirm the objectives of the study. More than half of the respondents singled out three criteria that they believe have consistently contributed towards a conviction of the divine inspiration of an experience. While this is positive, the fact that each of the remaining criteria found support suggests that this topic needs to be further investigated in the chapter to follow.

The need for further investigation into how one can go about preparing oneself for the task of discernment is also evidenced by a number of concerning observations. Firstly, the concept of a sinless, reliable and consultable human spirit found a not insignificant amount of support. Secondly, a significant portion of the respondents felt that regular infilling with the Holy Spirit does not necessarily render a person more inclined to receive and accurately discern divine guidance. Thirdly, more than ten per cent of the respondents felt that there was little to no connection between the use of one's gifts in ministry and the receipt of divine guidance. Finally, the lack of support for some of the preparatory exercises suggests not that these exercises are less valid but that they need to be further investigated to establish their level of relevance to the topic.

2.2. Interviews

My second research instrument was the qualitative interview. I needed a research instrument that would enable me to elicit some more thorough and concrete responses to the concerns I had already raised in the questionnaire. An interview would allow me to evaluate vocal tonality and modulation, facial expressions and some of the subtle inflections and nuances that can never be gleaned from written material. It would also enable both me and the interviewee to probe deeper for the clarification of ambiguities, resulting in answers with greater depth and relevance. I therefore requested an interview with the following leaders from each of the four churches in the Muldersdrift area: Chris Zeelie (Foresight Church), Craig Rowe and Sam Ngoma (Community Church), Dr. Kevin Roy (Muldersdrift Union Church) and Ds. Neels Kloppers (NG Muldersdrift).

Once the leaders agreed to be interviewed, I furnished each of them with an electronic copy of the agenda, allowing them time to prepare. The interviews were then conducted in person, one at a time, in private. With their permission, I took notes and recorded the interviews for future reference. I then summarised the interviews and forwarded the summaries to each of the respective respondents for validation. I asked that they scrutinise the summaries and confirm that I had not misinterpreted or misrepresented them in any way. Finally, I amended the summaries according to their recommendations. Each of the respondents confirmed that the summaries were an accurate representation of their views and gave me permission to use their names in the thesis. The actual summaries of the interviews are available in Appendix 2.

Overview of interviews

Perhaps the empirical part of this study is best summed up in the words of Dr. Kevin Roy, who suggested that the chosen topic is 'larger and more complex than perhaps any one of us can comprehend.' This certainly appears to be the case given the diversity of perspectives and experiences that were shared throughout the exercise.

With the exception of Dr. Roy, who took a firm stance in the relational camp, all of the ministers interviewed held a centrist perspective on the will of God. There existed amongst all of them, however, a stronger commitment to the fundamental principles of the relational view than any of the other views. For Kloppers and Rowe, there is no point to reading Scripture, obeying its precepts and striving for purity if one is not committed to God and intent upon fostering a deep and intimate relationship with Him. Roy and Ngoma took Zeelie's commitment to the primacy of son-ship one step further, suggesting that as we grow in terms of our relationship with God, the more capable we become of discerning His will for our lives. In fact, a common thread of opinion amongst the interviewees is that relationship is the key if we are to enjoy any real level of certainty regarding the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In times of choice, the believer who has come to know the character and nature of his Lord will almost invariably know what the best course of action would be.

There appeared to be a consensus amongst the interviewees that the guidance of the Holy Spirit is generally progressive and that certainty of a particular direction usually comes with time. They also all agreed that the voice of God can never be interpreted entirely subjectively, in a vacuum. As creatures tainted by sin, there always remains the possibility of the divine message being lost in translation. While the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit is certainly relevant and necessary, we must weigh all of the relevant revealed information maturely and objectively. God is not a Cosmic Jester who delights in seeing His people running around in circles, trying to discern His will. Rather, by means of a variety of vehicles of communication that He makes use of today, He will ensure that He gets His message across to us, in time.

While the ministers were not unanimous in their perspectives on the relevance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, they all agreed upon the Scriptures as God's primary vehicle of choice to speak decisively into our circumstances. Of the vehicles of communication that remained, they considered the mature counsel of other believers, inward promptings and the spoken Word to be most valid. In varying degrees, they also all agreed that our sovereign God can and may speak immediately, by means of an audible voice, a dream, a vision and perhaps even

some of the word gifts, should the occasion call for it. However God decides to communicate His message to us, the requisite response to His communication will be clearly evident. Again, however, it was strongly suggested that the authority of all divine direction is perhaps best understood from a relational perspective. God desires cooperation and collaboration more than obedience. Likewise, if we love God, we will be kingdom-focused and we will be inclined to seek and do His will – not out of compulsion, but out of a willingness to do so.

While involvement in ministry and an immersion within a positive Christian environment can be immensely beneficial, the respondents once again felt that relationship surpasses environment. We do not become automatically more inclined to accurately perceive the voice of God simply because we strategically position ourselves to hear. In this case, obedience without sacrifice is futile. It is the believer who makes sacrifices to pray, study Scripture and wholeheartedly seek after his God and His kingdom who is more inclined to perceive His voice. It comes as no surprise that besides servant-hood and a love for others, one of their primary recommendations for the development of a discerning heart is silence and solitude.

Generally speaking, all of the respondents were able to relate to most of the criteria that I had suggested one might be able to consider objectively as evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit. They did, however, identify an obvious flaw in my assumption that one might be able to narrow down recurring objective criteria to a select few, which would then serve as a personal set of tell-tale signs of the Holy Spirit's influence. Sometimes the Holy Spirit convicts and other times He comforts – the two experiences are as dissimilar as night and day. This alone serves to confirm that the ways in which we experience the voice of God will differ in different contexts. The experiences will, moreover, differ from person to person; for just as the Holy Spirit distributes different gifts to different people, He communicates differently with different people. Their advice echoes the sentiment of Jonathan Edwards, who suggested that we cannot measure our spirituality by the things that we experience. Neither is it advisable for us to make assumptions about what the voice of God should be like based upon what others have experienced. Indeed, the only source

that we can consult for the development of a healthy sense of expectation regarding the voice of God is the Holy Scriptures.

Chapter three

Biblical-theological analysis

This biblical theological analysis investigates what Scripture has to say about the decisiveness of God's communication with man and the level of awareness and certainty that the biblical characters experienced when God spoke. It considers some of the instances in Scripture where God spoke to establish some of the reasons why God chooses to speak and what our requisite response should be. It establishes what Scripture has to say about the nature of man and how certain aspects of our nature can either facilitate or impede our ability to perceive the voice of God. It investigates how environmental influences and practical exercises can influence our ability to discern clearly. It establishes whether or not there is any biblical support for some of the objective criteria that were identified in the empirical study. Finally, it considers each of the perspectives on the will of God and identifies which perspective is best supported by Scripture and the overall findings of the study. By uncovering what Scripture teaches regarding these issues, we will have arrived at an understanding of the situation as it should be.

3.1. Problem resolution: Establishing what we are to expect

3.1.1. Awareness of divine communication

Scripture reveals that God has spoken in a variety of ways throughout history. He has spoken through creation; angels; prophets; dreams; visions; the casting of lots; the Urim and Thummim; a gentle voice; fire; a burning bush; preaching; judgments; symbolic actions; signs; miracles; writings on a wall; a donkey; a trumpet; thunder, lightning, smoke and storms; a fleece; the sound of marching in the treetops; face to face; personal guidance; the words and works of the incarnate Christ; the risen Christ; prayer; the Scriptures; an unbeliever; the church; a direct word from the

Father, by the Holy Spirit, and in a variety of other unspecified ways.¹ For Henry and Richard Blackaby (2002:38), the key is not how God spoke but that 'God steadfastly refused to limit Himself to only one way of communicating. The significant point was that almighty God chose to communicate with people in unmistakable ways.' They explain that 'the Bible's overall testimony is that when God spoke, people knew it was God, and they knew what He was saying' (2002:257). I agree that these and other passages testify to the fact that God will take the initiative and ensure that He gains our attention, when necessary, by whatever means necessary.

Scripture suggests, furthermore, that when God chooses to speak, we will be incapable of overlooking or ignoring His voice. The book of Jonah contains the account of a man who attempted to run away from God after receiving an instruction to preach against the city of Nineveh. The prophet Jeremiah suggested that the prompting of the Holy Spirit was so intense and incessant that he grew weary from it. Eventually, he reached the point where he was incapable of suppressing the urge to speak the words that God had placed within his heart. He explained that the urgency he was experiencing was like a 'fire shut up in his bones' (Jeremiah 20:9). Gaebelien (1986:503) says of the prophet that he suffered a 'divine compulsion' when he writes that 'he found out the impossibility of denying his call. He learned that it was irreversible and that God's Word was irrepressible.' He explains that for Jeremiah, 'the Word of God was a reality, not the product of his thinking.'

¹ Scripture reveals that God speaks in many ways: Genesis 8:15; 12:1; 15:1; 16:7; 37:5-11; Exodus 3:1-4; 4:1-8; 19:16-19; 20:18; 24:12; 33:11; Numbers 22:21-35; 27:21; 34:13; Deuteronomy 4:33, 36; 18:18-22; 28:15-68; Joshua 4:1-24; Judges 6:36-40; 1 Samuel 3:4; 2 Samuel 5:22-25; 1 Chronicles 14: 14-17; 2 Chronicles 6:24-31; 7:13-14; Nehemiah 2:12; 7:5, 65; Job 40:6; Psalm 19:1-2; Isaiah 20; Isaiah 38:4; Jeremiah 32:6-15; Daniel 5; Amos 3:7; 4:6-12; Jonah 3:4-10; Matthew 2:12-13; Matthew 4:4-10; Luke 3:22; 9:35; 24:13-35, 45; John 10:27; 11:49-53; 20:30-31; 21:25; Acts 1:23-26; Acts 4:31; 8:29; 9:10-12; 11:1-18; 13:2; 15:1-35; 16:6; 21:10-11; 22:17-21; 27:23-25; Romans 1:18-20; 10:14-15; Hebrews 13:2.

In Acts 9:1-6, we read about the dramatic dialogue between God and the persecutor of those of the Way. Saul, who was not then familiar with the voice of God, did not waste any time second-guessing who it was he was speaking to on the road to Damascus. Of significance, Gaebelin (1981:370) writes, 'is the fact that Saul understood the voice to be a message from God Himself, for in rabbinism to hear a voice from heaven...always connoted a rebuke or a word of instruction from God.'

While God can therefore make use of a variety of dramatic vehicles of communication to demand our attention and speak definitely and certainly into our situations, Deere (2001:109) rightly cautions against us trying to glorify, seek, or even reproduce the dramatic. He explains that when God instructed people to do something out of the ordinary, 'He did it with such clarity that they did not wonder whether the command came from Him or from their emotions.' In fact, if we consider the period of time over which the Scriptures were written, it becomes apparent that even these dramatic encounters between God and man were actually quite uncommon. Our concern, therefore, should not be with the dramatic ways in which God may choose to communicate with us but with the promise that the Holy Spirit would 'guide us into all truth' (John 16:13).

This guiding work of the Holy Spirit, Clark H Pinnock (1996:218) explains, is 'normally gentle and non-coercive, of a kind that respects the creativity and even the folly of human beings.' As such, he explains that we need a balance of hope and realism. 'Let us be hopeful because the Spirit leads us and realistic because of our fallibility and proneness to error' (1996:220). Perhaps it is fitting to recount the experience of Samuel, who as a child was aware that someone had spoken but confused the voice of God with that of his uncle. Perhaps in biblical times even this was more common than we assume, when we consider Job 33:14, which reads, 'For God does speak – now one way, now another – though no one perceives it.' As discovered in the empirical study, even today there are people who feel that they may be oblivious to the guidance that the Holy Spirit provides. Our concern, therefore, is with developing the art of discernment, so that we can move from a

place where we become aware that God is leading to a place where we enjoy some level of certainty about what He is trying to communicate to us.

3.1.2. *Certainty of divine communication*

In ‘The beginners guide to the gift of prophecy,’ Jack Deere addresses the topic of certainty of divine communication. ‘For whatever reason,’ Deere (2001:45) explains, ‘God has chosen to vary the clarity, intensity and means of His revelation. This can make revelation difficult to understand. It can also affect our certainty over whether or not it is really God speaking.’ He cites some examples in support of this statement. Some of the biblical prophets suggested that the message from God was not mixed up with their own opinion or interpretation and that they were speaking the very words of God by saying things like, ‘the hand of the Lord was upon me’ (Ezekiel 3:22) and ‘the Lord spoke to me with His strong hand upon me’ (Isaiah 8:11). At other times, however, biblical characters did not enjoy such a high level of certainty. The apostles sent instruction to the Gentiles, explaining that ‘it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15:28). Likewise, ‘the healing of a lame man at Lystra rested on something as flimsy as an impression (see Acts 14:9-10).’

Deere’s observations appear to be consistent with the findings of the empirical study. The study showed that while the majority of the respondents enjoyed a high level of certainty that their last religious experience was divinely inspired, they still felt that they can be ignorant of the guidance that the Holy Spirit provides. They felt, furthermore, that we need to learn to recognise the voice of God over time. These conclusions are perfectly reasonable because as Petty (1999:175) explains,

Having an ‘idea in a vivid or powerful way does not certify it as godly. Experiencing an amazing circumstance does not guarantee its divine origin. Ideas, thoughts, and circumstances are not self-authenticating – even ones that have no “rational” basis, such as a dream or prediction.’

All of these things, Petty (1999:175) explains, need to be evaluated by their own merit and put through the grid of wisdom, discernment and judgment. All guidance, after all, is subject to our limitations, our biases, and our understandings. There is, therefore, always the risk of error. There is, furthermore, the possibility of delusion. Scripture describes the false prophets as having 'delusions of the mind,' as having 'prophesied out of their own imaginations' and as having 'spoken from their own spirits' (Jeremiah 14:14; 23:16, 26; Ezekiel 13).

Two broad categories

As we endeavour to establish what our expectation of certainty should be, I believe that it is helpful to think of God's communication with mankind in two broad categories. Firstly, there are ways in which God 'can and may' communicate with people. These include some of the less common, dramatic encounters that we read about within Scripture. In these instances, God's communication is of such a clear and specific nature that the recipient of the message experiences a very high level of certainty, regardless of the vehicle of communication used.

Abraham, for example, would have obeyed God's instruction to sacrifice his only son had God not have intervened at the raising of the knife (Genesis 22). Ezekiel built a model of Jerusalem and spent more than a year acting out symbolic plays as a sign of doom from the Lord (Ezekiel 4). Such enactments are not exclusive to Ezekiel, for Isaiah walked naked and barefoot through Jerusalem for three years (Isaiah 20:2-3). The apostle Paul, compelled by the Spirit, pressed on to share the gospel of Christ despite the risk of imprisonment, hardship, and perhaps even death (Acts 20:22-24). These are not the actions of men who were uncertain about what God had instructed them to do. These were men with conviction. Their attention to detail, coupled with their willingness to suffer pain and humiliation as a result of their obedience, testifies to the fact that they were absolutely certain that God had spoken. We are to remain ever mindful that God remains sovereign and reserves the freedom and ability to communicate with us howsoever he chooses. We are also to remain prayerfully hopeful that he chooses to do so.

Secondly, I believe that there are ways in which God 'does and will' communicate with believers. I agree with Willard (1999:89), who says that we need to contrast the more dramatic ways in which God has encountered human beings with some of the more common ways in which God 'addresses individually those who walk with Him in a mature, personal relationship.' For Willard, the still, small voice, or the inner voice, 'is the preferred and most valuable form of individualized communication for God's purposes.' The phrase 'still small voice,' which Willard (1999:87) draws from 1 Kings 19:11-12, might also be understood as 'a gentle whispering,' the emphasis being upon the 'unobtrusiveness of the medium through which the message came.' Elaborating, he writes,

'In contrast with other cases, the medium through which the message comes is diminished almost to the vanishing point, taking the form of thoughts that are our thoughts, though these thoughts are not from us. In this way...the human spirit becomes the "candle of the Lord" (Proverbs 20:27).'

I agree with Willard, who suggests that this gentle word may be overlooked or disregarded. He believes, furthermore, that it may be 'possible for someone who regularly interacts with the voice of God not even to recognize it as something special' (Willard 1999:90). Indeed, it is this inner voice, which we can only experience subjectively and which is so difficult to describe, that appears to be the cause of our uncertainty. Perhaps we might be more capable of perceiving this subtle form of guidance as the work of the Holy Spirit if we consider our experiences in light of the nature and purpose of divine communication.

3.1.3. The nature and purpose of divine communication

James 3:17 suggests that the wisdom that comes from heaven has certain characteristics. It is 'first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.' This passage, I believe, provides us with a valuable clue in our investigation into what it is like to experience the voice of God. I suspect that if we were to have an understanding of the nature or character of

God and His voice, and the reasons why He chooses to speak, we will invariably find ourselves better equipped for the task of discernment.

Nature

In his 'Systematic theology,' Louis Berkhof (2000) discusses the communicable attributes of God, which serve to emphasise His personal nature. He shows firstly that God is Spirit (John 4:24) and writes that because He has none of the properties belonging to matter, 'He cannot be discerned by the bodily senses' (2000:66). God is invisible (John 1:18; 1 Timothy 6:16) and it is only through the person of Christ that we have a unique, visible manifestation of God (John 14:9). Berkhof (2000:67) discusses secondly the intellectual attributes of God and shows that God is omniscient (Job 37:16). Because He is all-knowing, God is capable of revealing all things actual (Hebrews 4:13) as well all things possible (Psalm 139:4, 16). 'All things that might occur under certain circumstances are present to His mind.' God is wise (Romans 16:27) and while He gives wisdom to those who ask for it (James 1:5), the fact that God exercises His providential wisdom in the ordering of circumstances for the ultimate good (Romans 8:28) suggests that we can never fully share God's wisdom (Romans 11:33). Berkhof (2000:69) also considers the veracity of God, showing that He is truthful, reliable and faithful. Not only is God the source of all truth, 'He is ever mindful of His covenant and fulfills all the promises which He has made to His people.' Berkhof (2000:70) considers thirdly the moral attributes of God and shows that God is good (Luke 18:19); God is love (1 John 4:8); God is merciful, gracious and patient (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 103:8); God is holy (Psalm 99:9); God is a God of peace and orderliness (1 Corinthians 14:33); God is righteous and just and His precepts make the heart rejoice (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 19:8); God is jealous (Exodus 20:5), always seeking to protect His own honour, and God is a God of wrath (John 3:36), despising everything that is opposed to His moral character.

I believe that we can learn much from these communicable attributes of God's character. As we seek to recognise His guiding voice, we would do well to bear in

mind that God is Spirit and we need to relate to Him as best we can, as spiritual beings, still within the process of sanctification. Relevant here are the contributions of Derek Morpew in 'Breakthrough: Discovering the Kingdom.' Morpew (1991:194) explains that the regenerate believer lives with an inner contradiction brought about by an eschatological duality. On one hand, the Christian is a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17) but on the other hand, he continues to struggle with frailty and sin and lives in anticipation of the fullness of the kingdom life (2 Corinthians 5:2, 4; Colossians 3:5). Morpew (1991:202) writes that the New Testament teaches that 'there is both 'kingdom now' and 'kingdom not yet.' Our Christian experience takes place within this tradition. The Christian is a glorious contradiction. We are simultaneously triumphant and groaning.' In terms of the practice of our faith, Morpew (1991:203) suggests that we avoid an extremist response in either direction. While a defeated emphasis will produce defeated Christians, 'a triumphalist approach will produce unreal people who live in a spiritual bubble.'

It is significant to note, therefore, that we can understand and relate to the spirituality and invisibility of God only imperfectly, because we remain part of this physical world. Fortunately, we have the practical privilege of relating to God incarnate, the person of Jesus Christ, instead of trying to relate to our limited conceptualisations of a God we cannot fully comprehend. We also have the privilege of knowing that in all His dealings with us, God will always remain true to his Word and faithful to the promises He has made. Finally, we have the privilege of knowing that God's communication with us will always bear the stamp of each of the attributes of His moral character.

Purpose

Jesus explained to His disciples that He would depart from them but that He would not leave them alone – He would send them another Comforter, to be with them forever, and to guide them into all truth (John 14:16; 16:13). Future correspondence between God and man, Jesus explained, would be facilitated by the Holy Spirit. We

know that particular activities have been especially delegated to the Holy Spirit and that He works together with us for the accomplishment of the purposes of God. As we consider some of the reasons why the Spirit speaks, it starts to become apparent that He communicates with us in some way or another all the time.

In his 'Renewal Theology,' J Rodman Williams (1990:ch10) discusses the mission of the Holy Spirit, the first of which is to guide His disciples into all truth (John 14:16). 'The anointing of the Holy Spirit,' Williams writes, 'gives essential guidance and knowledge about all things relating to the Christian faith.' He provides illumination and understanding, vividly confirming the Holy Scriptures in our contemporary experience. Octavius Winslow (2003:156) shows that to the unbeliever, God's Word is as a sealed book. But for the believer, who is instructed by the Spirit of truth,

'It has opened to their minds with all the light and freshness of a new revelation. Doctrines once mysterious are now beautifully lucid; promises once unfelt are now sweetly consolatory; precepts once insipid are now powerfully persuasive. And to what is this maturity of the heart in the full belief of the truth to be ascribed? We unhesitatingly reply, to the witness of the Spirit, the Holy Ghost deepening His work in the heart, teaching the soul more experimentally, and guiding it more fully into all truth – in a word, bringing the truth more vividly to the mind with convincing power.'

It is significant to note that this illumination goes beyond a simple logical grasp of Scriptural principles. The Spirit can influence our very choice of words (Luke 12:12) and reveal some very specific information should He choose to (Luke 2:26; Acts 11:28; 21:11; 20:23; 21:4; 1 Timothy 4:11). In the experience of many, Williams (1990:242) explains, there comes 'an intense awareness of the things of God.'

The second mission of the Holy Spirit is to provide power for ministry (Acts 1:8). Through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we become effective witnesses. Williams (1990:250) writes of Spirit-filled believers that 'often their very being and manner is so filled with God's presence and power that others are profoundly

affected.’ The Holy Spirit also enables us to perform mighty works (Mark 16:17-20), which bear witness to the gospel: ‘The deed is the confirmation of the word, the visible assurance of the message of salvation’ (Williams 1990:252).

The third mission of the Spirit of God is certification. As the apostle Paul explains in Romans 8:15-16, we have received the Spirit of son-ship. As we cry ‘Abba, Father,’ the ‘Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.’ By the work of the Holy Spirit, we know that Christ abides in us, that we abide in Him, and that we have eternal life (1 John 3:24; 4:13; 5:13). The fourth significant role of the Spirit is sanctification. One of the activities of the Holy Spirit is to cleanse us from sin and to sanctify us or make us holy (John 16:8-11; Acts 7:51). He brings forth the fruit of the Spirit within us – those qualities that reflect the character of God (Galatians 5:22-23).

Finally, the Holy Spirit facilitates unity. He inspires fellowship and opposes disputes, dissensions and factions (2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 12:7). Relevant here is Jack Deere’s (1996:47) observation that the divine pattern for ministry is that we ‘hear’ in order to ‘serve.’ In this regard, Jesus is our perfect model. He judged as He heard His Father judging (John 5:30); His teaching originated with the Father (John 7:16); He spoke only the words of His Father (John 8:28) He did precisely what His Father commanded Him (John 14:31). The Holy Spirit conforms to precisely the same pattern. Jesus said of the Spirit, ‘He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.’ Deere (1996:49) goes on to explain that Jesus ‘passed this same method of ministry on to His apostles.’ They were led of the Spirit in order to serve and suggested to the New Testament believers that they are also equipped to serve, so that the body of Christ may be edified (Ephesians 4:12).

What is significant in the context of this study is this simple fact: when the Christian experiences the work of the Holy Spirit in his life, the Christian has, by necessity, experienced some form of divine communication. When we experience special insight into Scripture or develop a deeper appreciation of biblical principles because of their relevance in our own circumstances, we have heard the voice of the Spirit.

When we are spurred on to witness to others and to pray for the healing and deliverance of those oppressed, we have experienced the voice of the Spirit. When we enjoy a deep assurance of the fact that we are saved and that we have become part of the family of God, the Spirit has spoken. When we become aware of sin in our lives, develop a deep remorse for it, and feel a pressing need to repent of it, we have experienced the voice of the Spirit. When we are motivated to work towards peace and restitution despite our inclination towards the opposite, we can rest assured that the voice of the Spirit has been heard. By objectifying the work of the Holy Spirit, we become better equipped to discern His influence in our lives and begin to work towards the fulfilment of the objectives of the study.

3.2. Objectives fulfilled

3.2.1. Objective criteria for the evaluation of religious experience

While it is certainly helpful to know that the voice of God will always be consistent with His holy nature and His purposes for dealing with us, there is a remaining challenge: How we are to differentiate between the voice of God and other possible conflicting voices. James C Petty (1999:174) explains that ‘God, Satan, our sinful flesh (Romans 7:20), and our regenerate self (Romans 7:25) all have access to our conscious mind. These four sources can produce a storm of input to the believer.’ Since there are no special keys or trademarks to help us evaluate each passing idea, we must put ‘all such input through the grid of wisdom, discernment and judgment.’ We must turn our attention, therefore, to a consideration of how we are to differentiate between the conflicting voices of God, Satan, and self.

God’s voice versus Satan’s voice

We know that there are instances within Scripture where God allowed Satan and His forces to tempt people (Genesis 3; Job 1:12; Matthew 4; Luke 4). As Christians, we are told that we battle ‘not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the

authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6:12). We are warned of the reality of antichrists, who will seek to deceive people (1 John 2:18). This is why we are encouraged to 'put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes' (Ephesians 6:11). This is also why Christians are admonished, 'Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 John 4:1). In chapter nine of 'Hearing God's voice,' Henry and Richard Blackaby (2002:ch9) provide their readers with some suggestions as to how they can evaluate their experiences and distinguish between God's voice and Satan's voice.

Firstly, they point out that while Satan lies, Christ does not. If something is contrary to the Word of God, it cannot have been inspired by God. From the account of the temptation in the Garden of Eden, the Blackabys (2002:191) show that Satan leads people to question God's Word. Secondly, they show that Satan suggests shortcuts. He attempts to dissuade us from being fully obedient to God's Word by suggesting that a half-hearted obedience is at least better than no obedience at all. They provide an example from the life of Saul, who was not fully obedient to God's instructions and paid dearly for his compromise (1 Samuel 15:13-15). Thirdly, they explain that while God calls for repentance, Satan will try to justify sin (Amos 5:15; Romans 12:9). 'When you find yourself making excuses for your behavior or your attitudes, understand that such thoughts do not come from holy, righteous God' (2002:193). Fourthly, they show that while God unites, Satan always strives to divide. God is not the author of disorder (1 Corinthians 13:33); God draws people together (James 3:13-18). Therefore, they state that 'when you contemplate saying or doing something you know will be divisive, understand that your impulse is probably not coming from God' (2002:193). Their fifth point is that Satan fosters pride but that God brings humility (Micah 6:8). They explain, 'Satan will encourage you to exalt yourself and to bolster your self-esteem at the expense of truth and humility' (2002:194). The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, will encourage you to deny yourself. Finally, they reveal that Satan will always try to excuse questionable means by highlighting the

good. 'You know it is God when you are led to use a means and to achieve an end that both bring glory to God' (2002:195).

God's voice versus self

The book of Jeremiah reminds us that Satan is not our only concern. There is the possibility of delusion. As fallen creatures, we cannot even trust ourselves to make wholesome decisions without assistance (Jeremiah 17:9). To distinguish between the will of God and our own desires, the Blackabys (2002:195) suggest that we ask ourselves a number of questions. Firstly, will my decision honour God? They state, 'God does not need you to compromise your integrity to accomplish His work. He will not ask you to bring Him glory through sinful or questionable means.' Secondly, we should ask ourselves if we are looking for an excuse to quit. They suggest that the temptation to want to abandon a commitment and fast-track to a more speedy and comfortable conclusion is normally born of self. God always finishes the work He starts, no matter how challenging and time consuming. He always fully accomplishes His purposes in the lives of His people (Isaiah 55:10-11; Philippians 1:6). Thirdly, we must ask what the Bible says about the situation. We learn from Psalm 119:105 that if we frequently consult the Scriptures, we can start to eliminate much of the guesswork in our decision-making. More often than not, the Bible speaks specifically and candidly into our circumstances. Later in the chapter, the Blackabys (2002:210) touch upon a subject that I believe should inspire a fourth question: Do I have peace about this decision? They suggest that living according to the will of God will inspire tremendous peace and contentment (Matthew 11:28-30; John 14:27). Living outside of His will, however, will result in unrest, weariness and dissatisfaction.

Jack Deere (2001:64) likewise recommends four tests to aid the believer in discerning the difference between God and self. The first is Scripture. God will never instruct us to do anything that contradicts His word, for 'the Scripture cannot be broken' (John 10:35). This is also why we are encouraged to test everything and hold on to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). The second test is the character of the revelation. Deere (2001:67) states,

‘If we read the Bible with the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we will learn to recognize the character of the Lord’s voice. In the Scripture we see that when Jesus speaks to His followers, He does not condemn, nag or whine. His voice is calm, quiet and authoritative.’

The third test is a consideration of the kind of fruit that a particular course of action will produce. Deere (2001:67) shows that according to Jesus, we should be able to tell the difference between false and true prophets by the fruit of their ministries (Matthew 7:15-23). Likewise, ‘If we are following the voice of God, we can expect to experience the fruit of the Spirit, especially peace (see Philippians 4:9). The fourth and final test is the content of the revelation. Deere quotes Isaiah 55:8-9, which reads, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” From this passage he explains that a divine revelation can often contradict our natural thought process or even our normal way of acting.

Finding a balance between rationalism and relationship

Dallas Willard (1999:99) suggests that the guidance of the Holy Spirit does not function apart from our rational minds. He believes that the primary subjective way in which God addresses us is by means of the human spirit or the still, small voice. Based upon Proverbs 20:27, he writes,

‘The spirit of the individual truly is the “candle of the Lord,” in the light of which we see ourselves and our world as God sees. In this way, we are addressed by Him, spoken to by Him, through our own thoughts.’

Willard (1999:100) elaborates,

‘God uses our self-knowledge or self-awareness, heightened and given a special quality by His presence and direction, to search us out and reveal to us the truth about ourselves and our world. And we are able to use His

knowledge of Himself – made available to us in Christ and the Scriptures – to understand in some measure His thoughts and intentions toward us and to help us see His workings in our world.’

Willard (1999:102) goes on to explain that although in our minds we are subject to corruption, the fact remains that God comes to us through our thoughts, perceptions and experiences because ‘He can approach our conscious life only through them, for they are the substance of our lives.’ As such, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2) and are to take the time to be consistently considering our thoughts and consciousness for spiritual relevance.

From John 10:2-4, 14, and 27, however, Willard (1999:174) suggests that we recognise the voice of God because of familiarity with the voice, not because we have grown adept at recognising all of the objective criteria that point towards the divine voice. Just as sheep come to recognise the voice of their shepherd, so we come to know the voice of the Good Shepherd by becoming familiar with the quality, the spirit, and the content of His communications with us. In terms of quality, the voice of God, he explains, carries with it a weight of authority. We experience a calm yet steady impression upon our consciousness. The voice of God also has a characteristic spirit: a spirit of exalted peacefulness and confidence, of joy, of sweet reasonableness and of goodwill. Finally, in terms of content, it will always ‘conform to and be consistent with the truths about God’s nature and kingdom that are made clear in the Bible.’

Clark Pinnock (1996:233) similarly explains that a danger to avoid is a too-controlled objectivity: ‘One can become obsessed with formally defined criteria.’ This is essentially a quenching of the Spirit. Another danger is uncontrolled subjectivity: ‘Westerners today often practice interpretive individualism and forget that the Spirit guides the community’ (1996:234). Elsewhere, Pinnock (1996:13) provides some thought-inspiring remarks on striking a balance between the mind and the heart. He explains that the Scriptures ‘inform the mind and offer comprehensible teaching in the interests of a better understanding...it is our responsibility to grasp what can be

known by the mind.’ He adds, however, that while the Spirit of God is comprehensible, He is also elusive. He writes,

‘We cannot master the subject rationally. The Spirit cannot be imprisoned in concepts. Spirit is known by prayer as well as by study. The Bible contains few abstract symbols about the Spirit, but many symbols such as water, wind and fire. Such images, while they can be studied, need to be appropriated by the heart. The path of meditation has to be followed alongside a scholarly approach. To know the Spirit we must become persons of prayer who are willing to yield in complete openness to God. Waiting in silence and patient receptivity will cultivate a heart-knowledge of our Life-Giver.’

With this, we move on to a consideration of ways in which we can go about fostering just such a discerning heart.

3.2.2. Guidelines for the development of a discerning heart

In his chapter on recognising the voice of God, Dallas Willard (1999:170) shows that effective discernment comes by practice. He states that the voice or word of God ‘usually comes to us in conjunction with responsible study and meditation on the Bible, with experience of the various kinds of movements of the Spirit in our heart and with intelligent alertness to the circumstances that befall us’ (1999:173). The mere existence of these three factors inspires Willard to make a practical observation: God’s directive voice does not commonly come to us out of the blue. Instead, we are guided as we apply ourselves to exercising responsible judgment. With this, we move on to consider the ongoing obstacle of the fallen human nature, the need for constant infilling of the Holy Spirit, the importance of our environmental influences and some practical exercises that we can do to become more discerning.

3.2.2.1. The condition and role of the human spirit

We know that God communicates with us by means of the spirit that He has placed within us (Romans 8:16). In the context of this study, however, we need to consider whether the human spirit should primarily serve to facilitate communion between man and God or whether the human spirit is meant to be engaged to play a more active role in our decision making. As the empirical study confirmed, there exists amongst believers the understanding that we can look within ourselves and consult our own regenerate spirits for direction in times of choice. Kenneth E. Hagin (1998:41) promotes this perspective in his work entitled 'How you can be led by the Spirit of God,' explaining that 'if your spirit is a new man with the life and nature of God in it, it is a safe guide.' He entitles his fifteenth chapter 'depend on your spirit,' and essentially advocates the idea that the regenerate human spirit is sinless, reliable and consultable.

It is not difficult to understand where this perspective originates from. The Scriptures teach that whoever undergoes the experience of being born again is a new creation. According to the New King James Version of the Scriptures, 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.' Wayne Grudem (1994:475) explains that the trichotomist 'generally thinks of the spirit as purer than the soul, and, when renewed, as free from sin and responsive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.' He moves on to explain, however, that this concept is not really supported by the biblical text.

The mere fact that Paul encouraged his regenerate readers to purify themselves 'from everything that contaminates body and spirit' (2 Corinthians 7:1) suggests that the spirit is contaminable. For Gaebelein (1976:360), the words 'body and spirit' here 'denotes the Christian in his total personality, outwardly and inwardly, in his relations with other people and with God (1 Corinthians 7:34).' Paul's recommendation was necessary because it is not just that some parts of us are sinful and others are pure. Rather, in our very nature, we are utterly depraved. 'Every part of our being is affected by sin – our intellects, or emotions and desires, our hearts (the centre of our

desires and decision-making processes), our goals and motives, and even our physical bodies' (Grudem 1994:497). About himself, Paul writes 'For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature' (Romans 7:18). David affirms that at the moment of conception, he had a sinful disposition (Psalm 51:5). The teaching of Jeremiah 17:9 is just as plain, 'The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.'

As Erickson (1996:945) rightfully points out, regeneration is therefore not to be considered an end in itself. He writes, 'As a change of spiritual impulses, regeneration is the beginning of a process of growth which continues throughout one's lifetime. This process of spiritual maturation is sanctification.' As we proceed through this lifelong process of sanctification, we are changed into the likeness of Christ, from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:18). So although Paul says that his readers have been set free from sin (Romans 6:18) and that they are 'dead to sin and alive to God' (Romans 6:11), he nonetheless recognises that sin remains in their lives. For this reason, they are not to let it reign and not to yield to it (Romans 6:12-13). Instead, Christians are encouraged to strive for holiness in everything they do (Romans 6:19; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15).

We are to strive, moreover, to purify ourselves from everything that contaminates both 'body and spirit' (2 Corinthians 7:1). Scripture teaches that we have an immaterial part that is distinct from our physical bodies. We know that this immaterial part is capable of functioning somewhat independently of our natural thought processes (1 Corinthians 14:14; Romans 8:16) and is able to go on consciously acting and relating to God apart from our physical bodies when we eventually die (Luke 23:43; Acts 7:59; 2 Corinthians 5:8). Putting the debate between trichotomy and dichotomy aside, we also know that the overall testimony within Scripture is that God ultimately created us to have a unity between our material and immaterial aspects (Genesis 2:7; Matthew 22:37; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54). I agree with Grudem (1994:476) when he writes that 'we should not slip into the mistake of thinking that certain activities (such as thinking, feeling, or deciding things) are done by only one part of us. Rather, these activities are done by the whole person.'

The concept of a sinless, reliable and individually consultable human spirit is therefore not supported by Scripture. Logically speaking, our spirits cannot function apart from our consciousness. The immaterial part of man can never be empowered to relate to God apart from the conscious mind facilitating it. This is, no doubt, why Paul places such an emphasis upon the offering of our bodies as living sacrifices and the renewing of our minds according to the truth of the Word (Romans 12:1-2). Our ongoing battle with our corrupt natures and the influence of sin points towards the importance of being filled with the Holy Spirit on a regular basis.

3.2.2.2. Regular infilling as a necessary requirement for effective discernment

The empirical study showed that there were respondents who are uncertain about the effect that regular infilling would have upon their ability to discern. There were respondents, furthermore, who believe that regular infilling does not necessarily render a person more inclined to accurately discern. This is surprising, given Paul's instruction in Ephesians not to get drunk on wine but rather to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). Paul's recommendation is even stronger in the original Greek given his use of the word *epimeno*, which is translated 'to stay over, remain, abide in, continue in, or tarry.' The implication is that infilling is something that should repeatedly be happening to Christians.

In his *Renewal Theology*, J. Rodman Williams (1990:202) contends that in addition to the initial experience of being filled, Christians may experience subsequent, fresh infillings with the Holy Spirit. He explains the significance thereof when he writes,

'This is a totality of penetration with the Holy Spirit whereby, in a new way, all areas of one's being – body, soul and spirit (the conscious and subconscious depths) – become sensitized to the divine presence and activity. Likewise, a community of people filled with the Holy Spirit finds that their relationship not only to God but also to one another becomes suffused with a profound sense of God's moving in and through whatever takes place.'

Donald G. Bloesch (2000:274) points to 1 Corinthians 2:12-16 and rightly observes that 'receiving the Spirit is closely associated with having the mind of Christ. It is by the inner work of the Spirit that we perceive the mysteries of Christ.' The apostle Paul shows us in verse 14 that '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.' Without the participation and influence of the Holy Spirit, our walk of faith would be lifeless, dull, unenlightened and ineffectual. It is imperative, therefore, that we pray that we be constantly and repeatedly filled with the Spirit of God.

3.2.2.3. Environment

Almost ninety percent of the people that responded in the empirical study felt that there is a significant connection between an involvement within a spiritual community and the receipt of divine guidance. This comes as no surprise, for as the Blackabys (2002:214) explain, 'the Bible explicitly encourages us to surround ourselves with godly counsellors' (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22). They show that God has designed and instituted the local church as the perfect forum, where Christians can interact with one another and help provide direction for one other. Petty (1999:182) likewise prescribes an association with the wise. He explains that men and women of godly wisdom can be of immense help 'because of God's promise to bless the transfer of wisdom across spiritual generations (from the spiritually mature to those less mature in the Lord).' Proverbs 13:20 reminds us that 'He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.'

There are numerous accounts within Scripture of God using people to convey His message. Samuel delivered a message from God to the family of Eli (1 Samuel 3:10-18) and even to King Saul (1 Samuel 13:13-14; 15:23). Likewise, the prophet Nathan was sent with a message to King David (2 Samuel 12:7-15). It is just as important today for us to seek guidance and confirmation from fellow Spirit-filled believers. As Christians, we are all ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20), and Christ

recommended that His ambassadors be warmly received (John 13:20). The Blackabys (2002:187) explain that 'facets of the Christian life can be fully experienced only in the midst of God's people. Believers who choose to set themselves apart from an interdependent relationship with other believers will not be in a position to hear all God has to say.'

3.2.2.4. Practical exercises in preparation for the task of discernment

The field study yielded no surprises when the respondents selected prayer, Bible study, worship and meditation as the four most significant things that a person can do to grow in discernment. Petty (1999:§4) incorporates and elaborates upon these exercises in the fourth part of his work, entitled 'Seeking guidance: the seven elements of biblical decision making.' He explains that the elements of consecration, information, supplication, consultation, meditation, decision, and expectation need to be present as part of every search for guidance. I believe that these proposed steps are immensely helpful for people who seek to prepare their hearts to discern the best course of action in times of choice.

Consecration

Romans 12:1-2 encapsulates the concept of consecration perfectly. It reads,

'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 be conformed 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.'

The apostle Paul suggests in this passage that consecration is a conscious and deliberate act of the will. That we are to be 'living sacrifices' undergoing a 'process of transformation' suggests furthermore that consecration is meant to be something that is ongoing. It is not a weekend retreat but a radical reorientation of the human

heart and mind. Paul's use of the verb *metamorphoo*, Stott (1994:323) explains, suggests a 'fundamental transformation of character and conduct, away from the standards of the world and into the image of Christ Himself.' This was also the teaching of Christ when He encouraged his followers in Matthew 6:33 to shift the focus away from the things that we concern ourselves with on a daily basis and rather 'seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.'

Information

It is common sense that no person can make an informed decision without first having gathered and evaluated all of the contributing information. This is especially significant when we face decisions of a morally neutral nature. Only a fool believes that he already possesses enough knowledge (Proverbs 1:22-33; 26:12). Scripture implores us to consider wisdom to be more precious than rubies and incomparable with any other desire we may have (Proverbs 8:1-11). We are encouraged to seek after wisdom, even if it costs us all we have (Proverbs 4:7). When we embrace Christ, we embrace the foundation and fountain (Colossians 2:2; Proverbs 8:1) of wisdom itself. He gives wisdom generously to all who ask for it, without finding fault (James 1:5). The consultation of Scripture is therefore paramount in the information gathering process. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds according to the truth of Scripture (Romans 12:1-2). When we have biblical principles front of mind, we are better equipped to 'test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.'

History is also an immensely significant source of information when we are making decisions. Scripture continually reminds us to regard carefully what God has said in the past (Judges 2:10; 1 Kings 11:4-8). In Jeremiah 6:16 the prophet offered a word from the Lord and said, 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.' There were instances within Scripture where God instructed people to set up markers, which would remind them of significant events or turning points within their lives.

Often, this was done in the form of stone altars. This was true of Noah (Genesis 9:20); Abraham (Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 22:9, 14); Isaac (Genesis 26:24; 28:10-22; 35:1-7); Moses (Exodus 17:15); Joshua (Joshua 4:1-7); Gideon (Judges 6:24), Samuel (1 Samuel 7:12) and David (2 Samuel 24:18-25). God's people were also encouraged to engage in religious ceremonies or rites, such as the Passover meal and circumcision, which served to provide them with a clear sense of direction and purpose for the present (Genesis 17:10; Numbers 9:2; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Supplication

The Scriptures are full of invitations for believers to call upon God for guidance. Some examples from the Psalms include Psalm 5:8; 25:5, and 31:3. We are encouraged in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 to pray continually. Jesus likewise taught that we should always pray and not give up (Matthew 7:7; Luke 18). The apostle Paul consistently prayed that God would give the church knowledge, depth of insight (Philippians 1:9-10), spiritual wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:9-10). He encouraged believers to 'approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need' (Hebrews 4:16). We are reminded of James' entreaty in 1:5, '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.' James explains again in 5:16 that 'the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.' Prayer is therefore central to the guidance process. We should submit all of the gathered information, requesting that God provide divine illumination and perspective so that we can match the variables with Scriptural principles. As we wait in His presence, we see our situation in light of His character and eternal values.

Also significant as we pray for guidance, Deere (2001:33) suggests, is that we pray that we might be given spiritual gifts. From Matthew 21:22 and James 4:2, he suggests that many Christians do not experience the divine voice as expressed through the variety of word gifts because they have never asked for them. God is

sovereign and does everything just as He wills (Ephesians 1:11) ‘but that does not mean our actions have no effect on God.’

Consultation

The book of Proverbs consistently recommends seeking advice on difficult decisions. Proverbs 11:14 reads, ‘For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.’ Proverbs 15:22 similarly suggests that ‘plans fail for a lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.’ While we may be inclined to strive for independence in our decision-making, Scripture clearly encourages us to listen to advice and accept instruction, which will ultimately result in wisdom and success (Proverbs 19:20; 20:18).

We see in the book of Acts that there was a tradition of submission to leadership and the seeking of counsel in the New Testament church (Acts 15:1-21). Believers are encouraged to test everything (1 John 4:1) and to accept teaching from one another (Titus 2:3; 1 Peter 5:5; 2 Timothy 3:16). The concept of consultation is consistent with the biblical recommendation for the people of God to function together as a body (1 Corinthians 12). Each of us brings a different set of skills and insight to the decision-making table. We would do well to heed the advice of persons who have experience or expertise relevant to the particularities of the situation at hand. Besides often serving to confirm the best course of action, consultation can also reveal options previously unconsidered.

Meditation

Perhaps the most helpful verse on the topic of meditation is Joshua in 1:8-9, which reads, ‘Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.’ Gaebelin (1992:257) explains, ‘The Hebrew word translated ‘meditate’ (*hagah*) literally means “mutter.” When one continually mutters God’s Word to himself, he is constantly thinking about it.’ Such a constant attendance on

the things of God was the recommendation of seventeenth century commentator Matthew Henry. In his 'Experiencing God's presence,' Henry (1997) suggested from the life of David that we begin the day with God (Psalm 5:3), that we spend the day with God (Psalm 25:5; 44:8), and that we close the day with God (Psalm 16:7). His central theme is that there needs to be a constant attendance upon God, and an acknowledgment of Him in all that we do (Proverbs 3:6).

This is certainly consistent with the rest of Scripture, which encourages us to pray always (Luke 21:36), to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17), and to continue in prayer (Colossians 4:2). In an earlier fifteenth century work, Thomas à Kempis (2004:36) suggests from Luke 17:21 and John 14:23 that if we prepare a dwelling for God within our hearts, His visits with the inward man will be 'frequent, His communion sweet and full of consolation, His peace great, and His intimacy wonderful indeed.' He suggests, furthermore, that the solution for the man who does not know how to meditate is simple: we are to direct our thoughts to Christ.

Jack Deere (1996:19) contends that we fail to hear God because His voice is 'drowned out by competing voices that masquerade as God's voice, throwing us into confusion.' We must escape the clamour of everyday life if we are to hear the still, small voice that Elijah heard in the solitude of a cave (1 Kings 19:12-13). We must acknowledge the benefits of concentrating on God's Word, which gives light to our path, keeps us from sin, gives us sound counsel, corrects our folly, and guides us in every area of life. It is imperative, therefore, that we discipline ourselves to concentrate by setting aside time each day to devote purely to seeking the Lord.

Decision

Petty (1999:239) writes,

'*Growth* in wisdom is the divine model, not instantaneous change. Growth in discernment of God's will (Colossians 1:9-10) is brought about in those "who

by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:14).’

He explains that if we consider the character of God, the complexity of mankind, and the confusion caused by sin, we should not be surprised if real insight does not come overnight. The training of our moral senses is accomplished through seasons of decision making. We are, however, encouraged not to delay or avoid decisions out of a fear of being wrong (Luke 19:11-27). We must pursue insight right up until the time that the decision needs to be made. Then, with all things considered, we must decide, and trust that God will work all things out according to His good purposes.

This brings us to the topic of the adiaphora. Erickson (2001:10) defines the adiaphora as ‘matters regarded as non-essential to faith; especially in Lutheran theology, matters regarded as neither commanded nor forbidden.’ For Palmer (1958:120), there are three things we should do when faced with a choice between two morally good alternatives. He explains,

‘First, we must engage all our faculties in studying all the factors surrounding the two or more choices. Secondly, as we do this, we should pray that the Holy Spirit will strengthen our natural powers of reason, judgment and common sense so that we will make a wise decision. Finally, we should ask God to control all the circumstances of life so that, even though we may not know with certainty whether we are doing the best or not, we will as a matter of fact be moving in the right direction.’

Petty (1999:169) says of this area of Christian liberty that it is significant to note that it is subject to God’s pre-set, ordained plan. He explains, therefore, that we are to go about our business, making our choices as wisely as we can, being ever conscious of the fact that everything is subject to God’s sovereign permission (Romans 1:7) and being ever trusting of the fact that all providential action is taken in our best interests (Romans 8:28-29).

Expectation

We know that God's providence works everything for our good (Romans 8:28). We also know that if we do not make decisions based upon selfish motives and ambitions (James 3:13-16), but make decisions based upon God's will and priorities, we can rest assured that there will be a good outcome (John 15:7-8). We should, as Winslow (2003:201) explains, pray expectantly, diligently and perseveringly. We are to ask in faith and believe, and then 'watch daily at the gates for the answer, look for it at any moment, and through any providence.' We are not to pray as though we expected a refusal. He writes, 'God delights in your holy fervency, your humble boldness and your persevering importunity.' He quotes the much loved King James Version of James 5:16, which reads, 'The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.' As such, we must pray submissively, expect hopefully, watch vigilantly and wait patiently.

A hopeful expectancy, once again, is motivated by a childlike trust in a capable God, which is developed and reinforced over time. I refer once again to Pinnock (1996:13), who states that when it comes to the subject of the Holy Spirit, theology must always be more than rational. He writes,

'We are speaking of a reality that is active in our lives and that cannot be captured altogether in cognitive ways. There are depths of the mystery that cannot be accessed by reason alone. As well as studying the Scriptures on the Spirit, we must be prayerful and open, longing to fall in love with the One who frees and surprises, delights and searches, energizes and purifies us.'

Pinnock, for me, rightly suggests here that once we have done all that we can to understand the things of the Spirit we need to open our hearts to experience all that He has to offer us. We need to understand that there comes a time in our Christian walk where the focus must shift from cognitive analysis to simply enjoying the relationship that the Creator longs to have with us.

3.3. The will of God and the ultimate purpose of relationship

A verse, which has for centuries undoubtedly inspired hope in the hearts of believers, is Jeremiah 29:11, which reads, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” From passages such as these, it seems obvious why our thoughts would turn to questions about the will of God when we face difficult decisions. If we can discern God’s guiding voice and decipher His plan for our lives, we can make healthy decisions and be hopeful for a prosperous future. It is for this reason that so much of the material available on the will of God addresses the topic of the perception of the voice of God.

As established in the preliminary literature review, there are three major perspectives on the will of God. These include the traditional or specific-will view, the wisdom view and the relationship view. There are an additional two views, which are either a collaboration of or an outworking of the existing views. People who inadvertently take something from each of the major views can be classified as centrist. People who hold to the fundamental principles of the traditional perspective but differentiate between inner impressions and spiritual word gifts can be classified as traditional-charismatic. For the traditional-charismatic, impressions are subjective, non-reliable, non-revelatory and non-authoritative; spiritual word gifts, on the other hand, come from the outside of us, from the Spirit, and can be both revelatory and authoritative. Under consideration are arguments for and against each of the three major perspectives so as to establish which is most consistent with Scripture and the overarching purpose of our existence.

3.3.1. Traditional or specific will view

In ‘How then should we choose?’ Henry and Richard Blackaby (ed. Huffman 2009:33) argue in favour of the traditional or specific will view. They explain, ‘The core belief of this perspective is that God not only has a specific will for individuals but also communicates that will to people so they can follow it.’ It is held that ‘God’s

plan can be discerned by looking carefully into a combination of circumstances, spiritual promptings, inner voices, peace of mind, and the counsel of others' (Petty 1999:30). It is believed, furthermore, that this unveiling of the divine plan is necessary because 'without it, we might stray far away from the course God has intended for us.'

Arguments in favour of the traditional or specific will view

In his overview of the different perspectives on the will of God, Douglas S. Huffman (2009:23) shows that there is biblical evidence for the specific will view. Ephesians 1:11 clearly states that God sovereignly works out *everything* 'in conformity with the purpose of His will.' Matthew 10:29-30 likewise suggests that God is concerned with specifics: He knows the number of hairs on our heads and will not allow a single sparrow to fall to the ground apart from His having willed it. God has provided specific instruction to many of the biblical characters, under both the old and new covenants: Abraham and Lot (Genesis 12:1-4; 19:12-22); Elijah (1 Kings 17:2-6); Phillip and Peter (Acts 8:26-29; 10:9-24); Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-4). It is reasonable to conclude, Huffman (2009:24) explains, 'that the designer of the universe would have a specific will for each person, even as David indicates in Psalm 139, "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (v.16).' This was likewise the case in the life of Jeremiah, who was set apart to be a prophet to the nations even before he was formed in the womb (Jeremiah 1:5). It follows that this is true of all people, for to all those who were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, Jeremiah writes, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

While the Blackabys (ed. Huffman 2009:54) promote the commonly accepted external sources of guidance (Scripture, prayer, circumstances and mature counsel) as primary, they explain that God is infinite and that His ways of communicating are innumerable. For those who hold to the traditional perspective, the modern believer

should be capable of hearing the voice of God, both within and outside of the Scriptures, through direct supernatural communication (Deere 1996:66). 'The key to hearing God's voice,' the Blackabys (ed. Huffman 2009:54) conclude, 'is not to figure out a method, but to be spiritually open so that we recognize His voice however He chooses to communicate with us (Mark 8:18).'

Objections to the traditional or specific will view

The specific will view tries to dodge the obvious issue of one having to consult God for any and every decision by suggesting that we do not need to consult God for the mundane choices we face every day. This practical necessity, Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:87) explains, causes the traditional view to default to the wisdom view. We can only differentiate between mundane choices and important choices by exercising wisdom. The traditional view, moreover, challenges the biblical concepts of wisdom and free will (1 Corinthians 7:39; 1 Thessalonians 3:1). There is a lack of genuine spiritual energy, Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:95) explains, 'when our primary orientation is towards a fixed, static plan that God has for a person's life, laid out indefinitely into the future.'

Bruce Waltke (1995:11) argues that the concept of 'finding' the will of God is actually a pagan notion. When we seek to find God's will, we are attempting to discover hidden knowledge, to penetrate the divine mind, by supernatural activity. Finding the will of God in this sense 'is really a form of divination.' When we are motivated to pray harder, meditate more, follow impressions and look for signs in an attempt to divine God's will, we are in error. These activities, wrongfully motivated, bear an unsettling resemblance to the ways that pagans seek divine guidance.

For me, the most compelling argument against this perspective is offered by Garry Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:89). He states, 'One of the reasons people have looked closely at other models of guidance is that the complete clarity promised by the specific-will view is not the experience of God's people.' The traditional perspective implies that if a person is incapable of effectively discerning the will of God, the

person must either not have attained a sufficient level of holiness or must simply be spiritually defective (Friesen 2004:39). Perhaps more probable is that there are committed and sincere believers who consistently do all of the things recommended by the traditional perspective only to find that their theology does not match their experience.

Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:115) moves on to show that ‘when it comes to non-commanded decisions, we are given no criteria in Scripture for distinguishing the inner impression of the Spirit from the impression of the self or from any other potential “voice.”’ Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:97) agrees that the perspective fails us when we ask how we are to know with any real certainty ‘what text of Scripture, what impression in prayer, what specific circumstance, or what word from a fellow believer means anything?’ The simple truth is that ‘there isn’t a magic formula offered Christians that will open some mysterious door of wonder, allowing us to get a glimpse of the mind of the Almighty’ (Waltke 1995:12). The traditional perspective therefore struggles with the problem of subjectivity. Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:115) writes, ‘If the source of knowledge is subjective, then the conclusion also will be subjective and hence uncertain.’

It is possible, Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:89) explains, for God to give specific guidance by miraculous revelation. If He does, however, it will be truly miraculous – not a stirring impression or a feeling in the heart. Inward impressions are helpful and are meant to point the way towards wisdom. They are not, however, to be interpreted as one of God’s ways of ‘speaking.’ To dub such impressions as the voice of God, Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:90) suggests, is misleading at best.

3.3.2. *Wisdom view*

‘The champion presentation of what has come to be known as the wisdom view is the work by Garry Friesen’ (ed. Huffman 2009:26). Herein, Friesen argues against the belief that God communicates His will to individuals because of his understanding that God does not have a specific individual will for each and every

detail of a person's life. The wisdom view suggests that much of the confusion regarding how we are to go about seeking God's divine guidance can be eliminated if we settle once and for all just how many wills God has. To the commonly accepted categories of 'decretive will' and 'preceptive will,' Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:106) explains that the traditional view 'has added a third concept of "individual will," which lacks valid biblical and theological support.' As such, he suggests that people are 'wasting a great deal of time and energy searching for something that does not exist' (2004:41). James C. Petty (1999:56) elaborates further on this subject when he writes,

'In Scripture, the phrase "the will of God" can mean either the *plan* of God or the *commandments* of God. Theologians describe them as the two wills of God: His "decretive will" (His decrees or plan), and His "preceptive will" (His precepts or commands).'

Scripture often uses the phrase 'will of God' to refer to God's sovereign decretive plan. Examples of this include Ephesians 1:5, 11; James 4:15; Romans 15:32; 1 Peter 3:17. Petty (1999:59) argues that because of the existence of this sovereign decretive plan of God, we can be sure of two things: (1) God has one specific plan for our lives, and (2) the events and choices of our lives irresistibly and sovereignly work that plan in every detail. Petty (1999:64) makes reference to a number of other passages, which reiterate that God's providential purposes will always stand: Psalm 33:11; Isaiah 14:27; 46:9-10; Proverbs 19:21; John 15:16; Romans 8:28-30.

It is significant to note, however, that the sovereign decretive plan of God is secret. Petty (1999:74) refers to Deuteronomy 29:29, which reads, 'The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.' From this, he suggests that we must 'adjust to the idea of not knowing the secret things of God.' Instead, we are to 'focus on what God *has* revealed, namely, the words of His law and how we may implement them today.' By doing so, we shift the focus away from the decretive will

of God to the preceptive will of God. We concern ourselves not with unfathomable things but with concrete precepts that have been set down in Scripture.

From John 12:49-50; 15:15; 16:12-15, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:3, Petty (1999:88) shows his readers that 'the Bible is complete, sufficient, and thoroughly powerful for the completion of the faith and life of every child of God.' He adds that 'the completeness of revelation through Christ and the apostles makes it clear that we should not expect additional truths from the mind of God to us.' He encourages His readers to consider the prospect of further revelation in light of Colossians 2:2-3, which suggests that we can have 'the full riches of complete understanding in Christ, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' Our resources, Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:102) explains, are therefore best invested by simply adhering to the following four principles:

1. Where God commands, we must obey
2. Where there is no command, God gives us freedom and responsibility to choose
3. Where there is no command, God gives us wisdom to choose
4. When we have chosen what is moral and wise, we must trust the sovereign God to work all the details together for good

Arguments in favour of the wisdom view

Scripture teaches that the acquisition and application of wisdom is of the utmost importance. From Colossians 1:9-10, Petty (1999:136) shows us that knowledge of the will of God comes 'through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.' Paul's prayer that God would fill the Colossian church with the knowledge of His will by imparting wisdom is echoed in his prayer for the Philippian church when he writes,

'And this is my prayer: 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’ (Philippians 1:9-11).

This passage is not unlike Romans 12:1-2, where Paul encourages his readers to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. Paul explained that when your mind is renewed, ‘you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.’ The apostle likewise explained to the Ephesians in 5:15-17 that they could come to understand the will of God by living a careful and examined lifestyle, making every effort to be wise in every decision.

Petty (1999:140) shows that it was not only Paul who was committed to the belief that a knowledge of God’s will for one’s life or situation comes through wisdom, discernment and insight. James also encouraged his readers to ask God for wisdom (James 1:5-7). In fact, the words of James ties directly to the book of Proverbs, which is ‘largely dedicated to the description of wisdom, how it is obtained, and its outcome’ (Petty 1999:142). Proverbs 2:1-4 suggests that if we turn our ears to wisdom and apply our hearts to understanding, we ‘will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.’ Proverbs 3:13-15 likewise suggests that the acquisition of wisdom and understanding is more profitable than anything else that can be acquired in this life.

The wisdom view in practice

Petty (1999:144) defines wisdom as ‘the moral skill to understand and apply the commandments of God to situations and people. It is the ability to connect the principle to the application.’ This skill, moreover, is a truly supernatural gift. He explains that ‘from a biblical perspective, wisdom is more miraculous and supernatural than any prophecy or divinely inspired revelation. In this marvellous work, God progressively transforms sinners to think like Himself (Petty 1999:149).’ He elaborates,

‘With the Word of God and the Spirit, we grow to see our environment with the eyes of Christ. We have the mind of Christ. Guidance is not a series of miscellaneous directives from God; it is God-wrought illumination of our understanding.’

With regards to such things as vivid impressions, dreams, amazing circumstances, and a subjective sense of peace, Petty (1990:90) explains that they are works of God’s providence, not revelations of God’s will.’ He explains that these things ‘provide the context for God’s guidance, though they do not make up that guidance themselves.’ Friesen (ed. Huffman 2009:147) agrees that impressions can be an excellent source of wisdom but cautions that ‘the origins of impressions are multiple and mixed rather than single and simple.’ He writes,

‘One may be able to discern a dominant source, but given the complexities of the interactions of body, soul and mind, it is likely that a particular impression comes from multiple sources that are each influenced by factors or agents that are good and evil to varying degrees. Most impressions will stem from this mixture of influences, with none being perfectly good or perfectly evil.’

Objections to the wisdom view

Henry and Richard Blackaby (ed. Huffman 2009:160) argue that Garry Friesen’s failing to find the will of God and his subsequent seeking of biblical evidence to validate the principles of the wisdom view is a form of proof-texting. We are, they explain, not to go from our experience to Scripture; we are to begin with Scripture and let it speak for itself. ‘Then, if our experience does not match up with what is presented in the Bible, we ask the Holy Spirit to help us adjust our experience until it lines up with what the Bible teaches.’

Elsewhere, the Blackabys (2002:5) show that the Scriptures teach that we are not to depend upon our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5). They show from Isaiah 55:8-9 that even the best human thinking can never measure up to the wisdom of God.

They show, furthermore, from Jeremiah 17:9 and Romans 3:9-18 that because of the degenerate condition of man, we should not be making decisions apart from God's involvement. They state that 'people who make decisions based merely on what seems most advisable to them will inevitably choose something inferior to God's best.' Jack Deere (1993:46) adds, moreover, that the concept of pure biblical objectivity is a myth when he writes,

'The idea that fallen humanity, even redeemed fallen humanity, can arrive at pure biblical objectivity in determining all their practices and beliefs is an illusion. We are all significantly influenced by our circumstances: the culture in which we live, the family in which we grew up, the church we attend, our teachers, our desires, our goals, our disappointments, our tragedies and traumas. Our experience determines much of what we believe and do.'

The Blackabys (ed. Huffman 2009:164) add that the wisdom view is pneumatologically inadequate in that it does not thoroughly address the fact that Christ resides within the regenerate believer by His Spirit (Galatians 2:20). They write, 'This same Christ who gave regular guidance to His disciples now dwells within each believer. Friesen leaves Christ mute in believers' lives except when affirming what they are reading in their Bibles.' By excluding the possibility that God speaks directly to our spirits by His Spirit, we are eliminating a major avenue in our communion with Him. 'Dismissing the feelings and impressions we experience turns something dynamic and growing into a sterile formula' (ed. Huffman 2009:166).

For Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:170), the wisdom approach quenches the Spirit by turning the decision making process into an objective intellectual exercise, leaving no room for God. 'The wisdom perspective is all about testing and weighing and considering, but there is not reflected here a radical openness to the Spirit, an eagerness to know Christ intimately and to respond with joy to the inner witness of the Spirit.' What we need, Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:173) explains, is an 'approach to discernment and decision making that (1) takes account of the immediate presence

of Christ in our lives, and (2) enables us to respond to God, to our world, and to our circumstances with both heart and mind.'

3.3.3. Relationship view

Considering his presentation of the relationship view in 'The voice of Jesus' and 'Listening to God in times of choice,' Gordon T. Smith (2003 and 1997) is selected to represent the perspective in 'How then should we choose?' In this condensed version of the perspective, Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:174) acknowledges the validity of much of what the other perspectives propose but makes a few distinctions. He begins,

'The Blackabys indicate that they are open to such an inner witness, but they fail to provide an adequate basis for discernment – why this Scripture or this impression in prayer or this circumstance or this counsel from another is to be acted upon or not. In contrast, Friesen emphasizes the need for discernment without the flip side: a radical openness to the Spirit and thus to the voice of Jesus, the voice of the Good Shepherd.'

Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:176) argues that we are not, as the wisdom view suggests, to function independently or autonomously. The Scriptures call each individual to an intentional response to the will of God. Decision-making must occur 'within the created order, that is, within the nature and purpose of God for humanity within creation and thus within God's redemptive intention.' We are encouraged to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and we are enabled, by grace, to make decisions that are consistent with the reign of Christ. God's participation does not negate the legitimate exercise of human volition – we remain free agents, created within the image of God, with the capacity to choose. Contrary to the ultimate goal of those of a traditional perspective who seek God's will to discover the best option, Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:177) shows that God will not choose for us. This will violate the very nature of His creation. Given our natural limitations and a propensity towards sin, 'God grants us three gifts that empower us to choose well:

the Scriptures, the community of faith, and the Spirit.’ The initiative that the Spirit takes to be involved, to guide and empower and enable us to choose well, suggests that the issue is not whether there is a specific will for each person and whether this will can be known. ‘Rather, the fundamental issue is whether or not there is immediacy with God – a relationship of intimacy and communion – that makes possible this kind of knowledge of the particular will of God.’

Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:178) labours to point out two factors that should shape any discourse on divine guidance and decision making: particularity and ambiguity. Firstly, ‘the wonder of God’s redemptive work and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost is that, now, God speaks into the specifics of our lives, into our particularity.’ As such, each Christian must pay particular attention to their conscience (Romans 14) and discern how general biblical principles hold sway in their particular situation. Secondly, the issue of ambiguity: we ‘recognize, perhaps even with a mixture of frustration and anxiety, that we “see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12).’ Our decisions ‘are inescapably compromised by the presence of sin in our hearts and minds.’ This reinforces the need, once again, for us to understand that the disclosure of the will and purposes of God are centred in Christ (ed. Huffman 2009:183). We must understand, furthermore, that we ‘live now in the era of the Spirit, wherein Christ is known and experienced by the presence of the Spirit’ (ed. Huffman 2009:185).

Support for the supremacy of relationship

Support for the supremacy of relationship with Christ is certainly not in short supply. Smith shows from the contributions of Origen of Alexandria, Bernard of Clairvaux, Ignatius Loyola and John Wesley that the spiritual heritage of the church points to the possibility and priority of an immediate relationship with Christ. ‘We need to learn how to listen, how to be attentive to Christ,’ Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:198) explains, ‘as an immediate experience, and as a dynamic of our Christian experience.’ Sinclair B Ferguson (2001:19) points to the first question in the Westminster Shorter

Catechism, which asks, 'What is the chief end of man?' so as to bring our attention to the purpose of our existence. The answer: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.' The chief determining factor in all we say and do ought to be the glory of God. Our primary focus should be a conformation into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). We are, he explains, to follow the example of Christ (John 13:15) and 'deliberately seek to imitate Jesus' (2001:21). In practical terms, there is no more basic question for us to ask in our life decisions than this one radical, all-embracing principle: will this course of action tend to further the glory of God?

Ferguson reminds us of the classic work by Thomas à Kempis, 'The imitation of Christ,' the opening words of which are a quotation from John 8:12: 'He who follows me, walks not in darkness.' These few words serve as the foundation upon which all of Thomas' numerous recommendations for piety are built. 'The teaching of Christ,' Thomas (2004:3) explains, 'is more excellent than all the advice of the saints.' He advises that we are to imitate His life 'if we wish to be truly enlightened and free from all blindness of heart.' Indeed, he implores us to apply our attention to Christ, the Teacher of teachers, 'Who in one moment so enlightens the humble mind that it comprehends more of eternal truth than could be learned by ten years in the schools' (2004:104).

In his book entitled 'Knowing God,' JI Packer (2004:35) states that the purpose of our existence is to know God. The aim of every life should be to strive to know God. According to Jesus, the definition of eternal life is the knowledge of God (John 17:3). While we are not to boast of wisdom, strength and riches, we are encouraged to boast about this: that we understand and know God (Jeremiah 9:23). These verses, Packer suggests, provide 'at once a foundation, shape, and goal for our lives, plus a principle of priorities and a scale of values.' According to Packer (2004:37), just as one cannot have an intimate relationship with another person until that person opens up, so likewise is it necessary for God to reveal Himself to us. He explains that the quality and extent of our knowledge of other people (and of God) depends more on them than on us. He writes that our knowing of other people 'is more directly the result of their allowing us to know them than of our attempting to get to know

them...our part is to give them our attention and interest.' Knowing God, then, is a matter of personal dealing and personal involvement (2004:42). We need to make a concerted effort to make ourselves available to seek. More importantly, however, knowing and experiencing God is a matter of grace. The initiative must lie with God, 'since God is so completely above us and we have so completely forfeited all claim on His favour by our sins' (2004:44).

Dallas Willard (1999:96) likewise consistently suggests that God seeks to fully engage 'the faculties of free, intelligent beings who are socially interacting with agape love in the work of God as His collaborators and friends'. That God communicates differently and personally with each and every individual is consistent throughout the work of Willard (1999). He says in his second chapter, 'Only our communion with God provides the appropriate context for communications between us and Him. And within those communications, guidance will be given in a manner suitable to our particular lives and circumstances.' Willard (1999:108) explains that people need to understand that 'recognizing God's voice is something they must learn to do through their own personal experience and experimentation.'

Even the ambassadors for the other perspectives on the will of God cannot help but acknowledge the primacy of relationship with Jesus. Henry and Richard Blackaby (2002:234) explain that Bible is all about God's relationship with His people. The Christian faith, moreover, 'is a relationship with the person Jesus Christ.' It is as we spend time developing our relationship with the person of Jesus Christ, they explain, that we gradually come to recognise His voice. They provide some examples from Scripture of people who came to know and trust God more deeply over a period of time. Abraham, who the Bible describes as a 'friend of God' (James 2:21-23), took a lifetime to develop his faith. It took more than forty years, in fact, before He 'knew God well enough to be entrusted with His most difficult assignment (Genesis 22:1-3).' The gospels likewise provide an account of how the disciples came to know Jesus. 'The more time they spent with Him, the more they knew His nature. They learned He was trustworthy and gentle (John 10:3-4, 27). They came to understand that He would lay His life down for them (Blackabys 2002:236).' Throughout their

work, the Blackabys (2002:257) labour to show that when we relate to God, we are relating to a Person; it follows that the more time we spend with Him, the better we will come to know Him.

Elsewhere, the Blackabys (2002:11) explain that many people ‘find safety in theology, so they cling to dogma and facts *about* Christ rather than enjoying a vibrant relationship *with* Him.’ This, they illustrate, is precisely the sort of preoccupation that Christ condemned in the Pharisees (John 5:39-40). The apostle Paul, who like the Pharisees was well schooled in religion, had a dramatic personal encounter with Christ, which inspired his moving declaration of his life’s goal thereafter – to know Christ and the power of His resurrection (Philippians 3:7-10). From John 17:3 and 1 John 1:1-4, the Blackabys (2002:15) show that God created us for fellowship with Him. They explain that ‘the fundamental nature of Christianity is a relationship between God and people.’

Jack Deere (1993:182) also suggests that the most important key to ensuring that we are led of God and function effectively in our gifting is to place our confidence in Christ. He shows from the account of the seven sons of Sceva that reliance upon formulas or traditions will never ensure success (Acts 3:12-13). He says of these men, ‘They had the right formula, but they did not have the right relationship. Divine power does not travel in words but in a personal relationship (John 5:19; 15:5).’ Deere (1993:210) refers to the account of Mary at the feet of Jesus (John 12:1-3) to focus his readers’ attention on the most significant factor in the discernment equation: Jesus. We need to take the time to get to know Him, approaching prayer and meditation being ever mindful of the fact that we are meeting with a real Person. By virtue of the fact that we are meeting with a Person, it follows that we need to do more than just talk – we are to listen as well. He turns our attention to John 17:26 to show that ‘Jesus wanted His disciples to love Him like His heavenly Father loves Him.’ The central driving force behind effective discernment is a passionate love for and a relationship with Jesus (1993:217).

I find the relationship perspective to be the most persuasive. All that we have considered thus far in terms of preparation for and the actual task of discernment pales into insignificance when we consider this principle purpose of man. With their priorities in place, the apostles were able to face not just decision-making but endured beatings, stoning, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights and hunger for the cause of Christ (2 Corinthians 6:5-6; 11:25). Surely, the obstacles in the decision making process must fade to insignificance when we consider our options in light of the overriding joy of knowing God. I cannot agree more with Douglas S. Huffman's (2009:247) beautiful conclusion when he writes,

'Believers are to become more like Christ, taking on His character (cf. Romans 8:29; 2 Peter 1:3-4). In getting to know God in worship, study of His Word, and obedience to His commands, Christians develop the characteristics of Christ, Who always did God's will. As believers become more like Christ, they will find themselves more often in God's will (in any sense of the term). When they come to difficult decisions, they ask God for wisdom. Then, in faith, they make choices for God's glory, trusting God has provided all the appropriate information to lead to the right decisions.'

3.4. Conclusion

This biblical-theological analysis has addressed the research problem, establishing just what we can reasonably expect to experience when God speaks. It was discovered that throughout history, God has chosen to make use of a variety of vehicles of communication to get His message across when He needed to. The Scriptures suggest that when God spoke, people were aware of it. They were certain they had heard the voice of God and understood what their requisite response should be. There is no reason why we should not also expect for God to speak clearly and decisively into our circumstances should the need arise. God remains sovereign: He can and may make use of any of the dramatic forms of communication used in the past to communicate with us today.

Some of these more dramatic forms of communication are, however, to be understood to be the exception, rather than the rule. There are instead methods of communication that God does and will make use of consistently, as His preferred means of communication. In this current Messianic era, God has chosen to speak to believers by His Son, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It was established, however, that much uncertainty over what God is saying arises due to the fact that the work of the Holy Spirit is subtle. The Spirit prompts and guides, He illumines and He suggests. The Scriptures describe the still small voice of the Holy Spirit as a gentle whisper, unobtrusive and often overlooked. At times, the Spirit breaks through and speaks certainly and decisively; at other times, He merely guides us in the way we should go, allowing us the freedom to exercise our own judgment. As such, we can be aware of His voice and certain about what He is saying, but we can also be unaware and uncertain about what He is saying. Again, while we may be quite certain about our last religious experience, we may also be oblivious to the guidance that the Spirit provides on a regular basis.

The study showed, however, that it is not unreasonable for us to assume that we can learn to recognise the voice of God over time. We can, by experience, come to know something of the nature and purpose of God's dealings with us. Just as we come to know the character, subtleties and nuances of the voice of a partner or friend, we likewise learn to recognise the voice of the Holy Spirit, over time. The voice of the Spirit is, moreover, not lopsided. We should not assume that the voice of the Spirit is predominantly revelatory and directive because of some of the decisive ways that some charismatic leaders speak about hearing the voice of God. Likewise, we should not allow ourselves to be overcome by a charisphobia, assuming that the voice of the Spirit must only be non-revelatory and suggestive, serving only to point the way towards the wisest course of action. The biblical-theological investigation revealed that the ways in which the Spirit speaks are as varied as His nature and His purposes for dealing with us are varied. Likewise, the ways in which the Spirit speaks vary according to the individual and his particularities of personality and

environment. It remains for each person to take the time to get to know the holy Trinity personally, learning to become sensitive to the voice of God over time.

The identification of practical ways in which we can become more sensitive to the subtle guiding voice of the Spirit was the objective of the study and the biblical-theological analysis addressed this objective successfully. First, there are objective criteria that we can make practical use of to evaluate our experiences for divine influence. Besides the fact that the voice of the Spirit is always consistent with Scripture and with His holy nature, we established that the Spirit speaks for the furtherance of the agenda of the Kingdom of God. He focuses our hearts to love and serve one another. He helps us to identify priorities in light of God's values. He provides moral and spiritual insight into our situations, helping us to see what is fitting, best, edifying, and most glorifying to God. He moves our hearts and minds to know what to say so that we may exhort, rebuke, encourage and minister to one another. He helps us to identify the misdeeds of the body and develop a deep hatred for sin and a desire to please God. He gives us an internal sense of certainty and assurance that we are God's children, personalising and applying the truths of the gospel to our individuality.

Secondly, there are some practical exercises that we can do to develop a more discerning heart. We are to remain ever conscious of the fact that we are corrupt creatures, tainted by sin, in the life-long process of being sanctified by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Christ. Understanding our weakness, we are to seek to be repeatedly filled with the Spirit and are to immerse ourselves within environments that will have a positive effect upon us. We must practice consecration, offering ourselves as living sacrifices, seeking to exchange our old ambitions and ways of living for new ones. We are to practice supplication, consistently setting time aside to pray and call upon God for guidance, wisdom and understanding so that we may see our situations in light of God's character and eternal values. We must spend time reading and studying the Scriptures, understanding that the Holy Spirit communicates His will to us primarily through them. We must make the best possible use of the institution of the local church, interacting with one another and seeking

direction and mature counsel from others. We should be meditating upon Scripture and upon spiritual principles at every opportunity as this will inspire focus and reform and allow the Spirit the freedom to open our minds to a deeper understanding. We should be making our choices as wisely, faithfully and as responsibly as we can, trusting and expecting that God will work out all the details for our ultimate good.

That we have a loving heavenly Father Who only wants what is best for His children points, again, towards the ultimate purpose of the biblical-theological analysis: to illustrate the overriding importance of relationship. While each of the perspectives on the will of God differ in terms of how believers are to go about ascertaining the guidance that God has promised to provide, each of the perspectives are committed to a number of common principles. They all agree that God's Word is the primary source of guidance but that God can give specific, even miraculous, direction to individual believers if and whenever He chooses. They all agree that the Holy Spirit plays a significant role in the guidance of believers but that God expects us to exercise our free will and make wise, considered and mature decisions. Finally, they all agree that there cannot be discernment apart from relationship: having a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ is of utmost importance. In seeking to know and become more like Christ, we naturally and invariably do all of the things necessary for us to become effective perceivers of the voice of God.

Chapter 4

Reasonable expectations

Having arrived at an understanding of what we can reasonably expect to experience when God speaks, we are left with the contemporary obligation of making some practical recommendations for change and growth. This I have done in the form of an outline, which can be included as part of a new disciple training course, as a topic for discussion within a home cell or Bible study setting, or even as part of the agenda in a conference or seminar. This outline serves to highlight the most significant points to be taken into consideration during any discussion on the perception of the voice of God. The outline can be used for a light, introductory study, serving to instill foundational principles at a glance, or as a supplement for further investigation.

What can we reasonably expect to experience when God speaks?

The language that Christians use to share their religious experiences is sometimes misleading. It is not uncommon to hear Evangelicals say things like 'God spoke to me' or 'God told me.' Sometimes, we base our expectations upon what we assume other people are experiencing. Later, when our experience does not match our expectation, we start to question both God and ourselves. Instead, we should consider what the Bible says about the ways in which we might reasonably expect for God to speak to us in modern times.

The ways in which God speaks in modern times

<i>The ways in which God speaks in modern times</i>	<i>What does the Bible say?</i>	<i>Practical observations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>God is sovereign and He can speak however He wants, whenever He wants</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God can and may make use of any vehicle of communication to get His message across when He needs to (Daniel 4:35; Psalm 115:3; Job 33:14) When God spoke to people in Scripture, they were aware of it (Jeremiah 20:9; Jonah; Acts 9:1-6) When God spoke to people in Scripture, they were certain about what He had said and what their requisite response should be (Genesis 22; Ezekiel 4; Isaiah 20:2-3; Acts 20:22-24) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is not unreasonable to remain prayerfully hopeful for God to communicate with us in a dramatic way God is more than capable of speaking clearly and decisively into our circumstances should He need to When God chooses to speak, we will know that He has spoken and what is required of us in response We must place our trust in God's ability to speak, not in our ability to discern We don't need to spend time evaluating every turn of events, every passing thought or every rising emotion We must not become despondent and self-deprecating if God does not speak in the ways

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Dramatic forms of communication are the exception rather than the norm</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this current Messianic era, God has chosen to speak to believers by His Son, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 1:2; Ezekiel 36:26-27) • The work of the Holy Spirit is subtle and can be overlooked. He guides and illumines, prompts and suggests (1 Kings 19:11-13; Job 33:14; Proverbs 20:27; John 16:13). • We can learn to recognise and listen to the voice of God over time (John 10:27) • The voice of God is consistent with His holy nature 	<p>we hoped He would</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We should be prayerfully hopeful but not obsessed with seeking to hear the voice of God in a dramatic way • The Spirit speaks into our lives, even if it seems as if we are oblivious to His voice • We needn't feel pressured to discern the voice of the Spirit. Like the voice of a friend, we come to recognise it over time • Because God is Spirit, He cannot be discerned by the bodily senses (John 1:18; 4:24; 1 Timothy 6:16) • Because God is omniscient, He provides wisdom, insight and understanding (Job 37:16; Psalm 139:4,16;
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Romans 16:27;
Hebrews 4:13; James
1:5)

- The voice of God will exude the attributes of His nature, namely, goodness (Luke 18:19); love (1 John 4:8); mercy, grace and patience (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 103:8); holiness (Psalm 99:9); peace and orderliness (1 Corinthians 14:33); righteousness (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 19:8) and retribution (Exodus 20:5; John 3:36)
- The voice of God is consistent with His purposes for dealing with us
- We experience the voice of the Spirit by necessity when we experience His work in our lives
- The Holy Spirit guides us into all truth (John 14:16). He provides illumination and understanding, vividly confirming the Holy Scriptures in our contemporary experience
- The Holy Spirit provides

power for ministry,
enabling us to become
effective witnesses to
the gospel (Acts 1:8;
Mark 16:17-20)

- The Holy Spirit communicates an inward assurance to us that we are God's children (Romans 8:15-16)
- The Holy Spirit sanctifies us, challenging sin and bringing forth the fruit of the Spirit (John 16:8-11; Acts 7:51; Galatians 5:22-23)
- The Holy Spirit speaks to facilitate unity (2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 12:7)
- The ways in which the Spirit speaks vary according to the individual and his particularities of personality and environment
- God does not communicate with any two people in precisely the same way
- God seeks to have an intimate and personal relationship with each and every individual

It is certainly liberating to know that when it comes to the hearing of the voice of God, the initiative does not lie with us. If we need to hear, God will speak. We can trust in the fact that God will speak clearly and decisively into our circumstances, that we will be aware of His voice, and that we will not struggle with uncertainty over what has been communicated. Also encouraging as we consider the mission of the Holy Spirit is the realisation that He speaks to all of us in some way or another all the time. For many, however, they would like to become more capable of discerning the subtle voice of the Holy Spirit. A pressing concern, therefore, is how we are to go about differentiating between the conflicting voices of God, Satan and self.

Objective criteria for the evaluation of religious experience

<i>Objective criteria for the evaluation of religious experience</i>	<i>What does the Bible say?</i>	<i>Practical observations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>God's voice versus Satan's voice</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satan lies and encourages us to question God's Word (Genesis 3; Matthew 4) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If they are inspired by God, our desires, motivations or convictions should conform to biblical principles
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satan suggests shortcuts, attempting to dissuade us from full obedience to God (1 Samuel 15:13-15) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any inclination to compromise on full obedience to God is not inspired by the Holy Spirit
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God calls for repentance. Satan tries to justify sin (Amos 5:15; Romans 12:9) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When God speaks, we are convicted and moved to repent. When Satan speaks, we start to seek excuses

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God unites. Satan strives to divide (1 Corinthians 13:33; James 3:13-18) • Satan fosters pride. God brings humility (Micah 6:8) • Satan highlights the good to justify questionable means (Matthew 4:8-9) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divisive impulses are inspired by Satan. God speaks to motivate peace and unity • The voice of the Spirit will encourage modesty and self-sacrifice, not egotism and self-importance • We should be weary when we find ourselves arguing that 'It will be for the ultimate good' |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>God's voice versus self</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God is true to His Word (John 10:35; 1 Thessalonians 5:21) • The voice of God is consistent with His holy nature. God is good (Luke 18:19); loving (1 John 4:8); merciful, gracious and patient (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 103:8); holy (Psalm 99:9); peaceful, orderly (1 Corinthians 14:33) and righteous • God's involvement always produces good fruit (Matthew 7:15-23) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We know that our inclinations are inspired by self when they challenge biblical principles • The voice of self is consistent with our fallen natures, which are inclined towards sin and corruption • The Roman Catholic capital vices point towards some tell-tale attributes of self: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy and gluttony • If we are consistently following the voice of God, we can expect to |

	experience the fruit of the Spirit, especially peace (Luke 6:43; Philippians 4:9)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The voice of God is consistent with His purposes for dealing with us, such as the provision of insight and understanding, empowerment for ministry, sanctification and the facilitation of unity in the body of Christ (John 14:16; Acts 1:8; Mark 16:17-20; John 16:8-11; Acts 7:51; Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 12:7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God works together with us for the achievement of His purposes. Sometimes we allow our sinful inclinations to get in the way (John 15:5; Romans 7:15-20; Hebrews 12:1-2) When we align ourselves with God's purposes, we position ourselves to hear His voice more clearly When we struggle to see God's purposes being fulfilled, we should ask whose voice we are attending to more closely

There are not very many of us who would easily make such a candid confession about our failings and weaknesses like the apostle Paul does in Romans 7:15-20. Here, Paul explains that while he has every intention to do good he continually struggles against his sinful nature. Despite the obstacle of sin and a corrupt nature, however, we have all been mandated to walk in a manner that is worthy of the calling we have received, be holy and follow after the voice of God (John 10:27; 14:26; 16:13; Ephesians 4:1; 1 Peter 1:15-16). We must consider ways in which we can align ourselves with God's purposes, develop a more discerning heart, and make

healthy decisions. We move on, therefore, to a consideration of the condition and role of the human spirit, the need for infilling with the Holy Spirit, the importance of environment and some practical exercises in preparation for the task of discernment.

Guidelines for the development of a discerning heart

<i>Guidelines for the development of a discerning heart</i>	<i>What does the Bible say?</i>	<i>Practical observations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>The condition and role of the human spirit</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In our very nature, we are utterly depraved. Every part of our being is affected by sin (Psalm 51:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 7:18) The regenerated human spirit is contaminable (2 Corinthians 7:1) God ultimately created us to have a unity between our material and immaterial aspects (Genesis 2:7; Matthew 22:37; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The regenerate human spirit is not sinless, reliable and consultable We are not to 'look within' for guidance in times of choice The human spirit serves to facilitate communion between God and man We are to engage all our faculties during the decision-making process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Regular infilling as a necessary requirement for effective discernment</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We are encouraged to be constantly and repeatedly filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We should be obedient to the Word of God and seek to be filled

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The more we are filled, the more capable we become of living by and walking according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:16, 25) • Receiving the Spirit is closely associated with having the mind of Christ. It is by the inner work of the Spirit that we perceive the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:12-16) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular infilling results in a closer walk with God and improved sensitivity to His voice • Without the Holy Spirit, there is no capacity to discern the voice of God |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are encouraged to surround ourselves with godly counsellors (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22) • We are encouraged to seek counsel when we face important decisions (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 19:20; 20:18; Acts 15:1-21; 1 John 4:1; Titus 2:3; 1 Peter 5:5; 2 Timothy 3:16) • God communicates with us through other people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God has designed and instituted the local church as the perfect forum, where Christians can interact with one another and help provide direction for one other • Scripture does not recommend making decisions in a vacuum • Others can provide confirmation, inspire |

	(1 Samuel 3:10-18; 1 Samuel 13:13-14; 15:23; 2 Samuel 12:7-15)	caution, or even offer differing perspectives previously unconsidered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Practical exercises in preparation for the task of discernment</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consecration: We are called to consecrate ourselves to God (Matthew 6:33; Romans 12:1-2; 1 Peter 1:14-16) • Information gathering: We are encouraged to seek after wisdom, even if it costs us all we have (Proverbs 1:22-33; 26:12; Proverbs 8:1-1; Proverbs 4:7; Colossians 2:2; Proverbs 8:1) • Supplication: We are invited to call upon God for guidance (Psalm 5:8; 25:5; 31:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Matthew 7:7; Luke 18) • Consultation: Scripture recommends seeking advice on difficult 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are to make a conscious and deliberate effort to shift the focus away from the standards of the world and commit ourselves to imitating Christ • When we have biblical principles front of mind, we are better equipped to 'test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will' (Romans 12:1-2) • Prayer is central to the guidance process. We should submit all of the gathered information, requesting that God provide divine illumination and perspective so that we can match the variables with Scriptural principles • Others can provide confirmation, inspire caution, or even offer

decisions (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 19:20; 20:18; Acts 15:1-21; 1 John 4:1; Titus 2:3; 1 Peter 5:5; 2 Timothy 3:16)	differing perspectives previously unconsidered
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditation: We are encouraged to meditate upon God and His Word day and night (Joshua 1:8-9; Psalm 5:3; 16:7; 25:5; 44:8; Proverbs 3:6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A constant attendance upon the things of God cultivates familiarity with spiritual principles and sets the stage for clear discernment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision: We are encouraged not to delay or avoid decisions out of a fear of being wrong (Luke 19:11-27) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are to go about our business, making our choices as wisely as we can, being ever conscious of the fact that everything is subject to God's sovereign permission (Romans 1:7) and being ever trusting of the fact that all providential action is taken in our best interests (Romans 8:28-29)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectation: If we do not make decisions based upon selfish motives and ambitions (James 3:13-16), but make decisions based 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We must pray submissively, expect hopefully, watch vigilantly and wait patiently

upon God's will and
priorities, we can rest
assured that there will
be a good outcome
(John 15:7-8; Romans
8:28)

While these preparatory exercises are certainly beneficial when we face decisions of a difficult nature, they may not help us answer one remaining fundamental question: is my decision in line with God's will for my life? We know that God has a plan for each and every one of us (Jeremiah 29:11) and we naturally assume that if we can only discover His plan, our lives will be fulfilling and prosperous. There are a number of differing perspectives on the will of God, each of which has a different approach to the seeking of divine guidance. Some people are more conservative in their approach, relying more upon a God-inspired wisdom gained through an immersion in Scripture, while others seek direction through divine revelation. Fortunately, ambassadors for each of the perspectives agree that certain extremes should be avoided while certain foundational principles should be adhered to.

The will of God and the ultimate purpose of relationship

<i>The will of God and the ultimate purpose of relationship</i>	<i>What does the Bible say?</i>	<i>Practical observations</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Unhealthy extremes</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> God gives us wisdom and a free will to make responsible choices (1 Corinthians 7:39; 1 Thessalonians 3:1) Man is utterly corrupt. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We do not need to consult God for any and every decision Pure biblical objectivity

	<p>Not even the best human thinking can measure up to the wisdom of God (Proverbs 3:5; Isaiah 55:8-9; Jeremiah 17:9; Romans 3:9-18)</p>	<p>is a myth</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We should not depend entirely upon our own understanding and attempt to make decisions apart from God's involvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christ resides within the regenerate believer by His Spirit (Galatians 2:20) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Christ, who gave regular guidance to His disciples, now dwells within each believer. We must not live and make decisions as though this were not true
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are encouraged not to quench or grieve the Spirit of God (1 Thessalonians 5:19; Ephesians 4:30) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We must not turn the decision making process into an objective intellectual exercise, leaving no room for God
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God has a sovereign decretive will for our lives. He is concerned with every minute detail of our existence (Psalm 139:16; Jeremiah 29:11; Matthew 10:29-30; Romans 15:32; Ephesians 1:5, 11; James 4:15; 1 Peter 3:17) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What God has decreed will come to pass • The events and choices of our lives irresistibly and sovereignly work God's plan in every detail
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sovereign decretive will of God is secret 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We must adjust to the idea of not knowing the

<p>(Deuteronomy 29:29)</p>	<p>secret things of God</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have no business trying to discover the decretive will of God • We can exercise our free will, make wise decisions, and trust that God will work out everything for the best, according to his decretive will
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God also has a preceptive will, which is clearly set out within Scripture. These biblical precepts are fully sufficient for faith and life (John 12:49-50; 15:15; 16:12-15, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God's Word is to be considered our primary source of guidance • We are to focus on what God has revealed, namely, the words of His law and how we may implement them today
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are invited to be involved in the fulfilment of God's plan and purposes (Matthew 6:10; Romans 12:1-2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decision-making must occur within the created order, that is, within the nature and purpose of God for humanity within creation and thus within God's redemptive intention
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Holy Spirit teaches and guides us into all truth (John 14:26; 16:13; Luke 12:12) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The initiative that the Spirit takes to be involved, to guide and empower and enable us to choose well points

		towards the overarching purpose of our existence: a relationship of intimacy and communion that makes possible the knowledge of the will of God
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• God speaks into the specifics of our lives, into our particularity (Romans 14)		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Christian must pay particular attention to their conscience and discern how general biblical principles hold sway in their particular situation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We live in an eschatological duality: the 'already but not yet' (1 Corinthians 13:12)		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We will invariably struggle with some ambiguity regarding the perception of God's guiding voice
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Our primary purpose is to follow, imitate, conform into the image of and foster a deep and intimate relationship with Christ (Jeremiah 9:23; John 12:1-3; 13:15; Romans 8:29)		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The more we get to know the person of Jesus, the more proficient we become at knowing what He would have us do in any given situation

As we go about seeking the divine guidance that God has promised to provide, we would do well to adhere to these foundational principles. God has given us a free will and the responsibility to choose. As such, we do not need to seek His will in all our

decisions. Neither will God choose for us, because this will violate the very nature of His creation. God does, however, want to participate in our decision-making and He desires for us to make decisions in accordance with His plans and purposes. Some of God's plans and purposes are hidden and we are wasting precious time and energy trying to discover them. Instead, we should focus upon the resources that God has equipped us with to make healthy decisions: the Scriptures, the community of faith, and the Holy Spirit. These resources provide us with all we need for faith and life, and as we put them to use, making decisions as wisely as we can, we can rest assured that God will sovereignly work out all the details for our good.

We need to understand that by our very nature, we are corrupt, and that no amount of earthly wisdom can ever measure up to the wisdom that God can provide, through the illumination of His Word to our hearts and minds. As such, we cannot be overly objective in our decision-making, making decisions in a vacuum, relying solely upon our own logical interpretation of the Scriptures. We are not to quench the Spirit but must live in a way that testifies to the fact that Christ resides within us by His Spirit. At the same time, however, we cannot be overly subjective in our approach to decision-making. Again, God may impress Himself upon our consciousness in a dramatic way should He need to, but this is not how He generally chooses to speak. We are to engage all our faculties during the decision-making process, correctly handling the Word of truth, requesting the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and making optimal use of the mature spiritual counsel which He often uses to steer us in the right direction.

Finally, we must come to terms with the fact that we live in a period where the fullness of our salvation has not been fully realised. The knowledge and understanding that we develop in this life is imperfect and partial compared with the perfect knowledge and understanding that we will enjoy in heaven. As such, we will invariably struggle with some ambiguity as we go about trying to seek God's guidance for our life decisions. Fortunately, the overarching purpose of our existence is not to overly busy ourselves with the task of discernment but with fostering a deep

and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, out of which guidance and direction will naturally and invariably flow.

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Appendix 1

Survey questionnaire

Was that You, God?

Dear respondent,

I would like to thank you for your willingness to participate in this survey. Your contribution will hopefully go a long way towards helping me provide answers to a question that all Christians have undoubtedly found themselves asking at some stage in their lives: what is it like to experience the voice of God?

Most Christians would agree that the Bible contains everything that we need for faith and life and that we should be capable of making wise decisions from the guidelines that have been given to us within Scripture. What are we to make of the fact, however, that God has also placed His Holy Spirit within us to guide us and teach us and remind us of the things that Jesus taught (John 14:26)? What can we reasonably expect to experience when the Holy Spirit ‘guides’ or ‘teaches’ or ‘reminds’ us of something?

In addition to this subjective divine guidance, we must also address the question of spiritual gifts. While some Christians believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit ceased at the end of the apostolic era, others believe that they continue to operate today. One gift that is particularly relevant is the gift of prophecy. Wayne Grudem defines the gift of prophecy as ‘the speaking of merely human words to report something that God has brought spontaneously to mind.’ Again, we must ask how we are to differentiate between something that God may have brought to mind and something that may have merely surfaced from our own subconscious.

Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire

By responding to the questions posed below, you will be contributing towards a practical-theological study into how God communicates with modern man. The study seeks to provide objective criteria for the evaluation of religious experience and practical guidelines for the development of a discerning heart.

Please note that there is no obligation for you to complete the survey or to answer any questions that you would rather not answer. By participating in this survey, however, you provide consent for the use of your contributions in the research project. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, please do not add your name or any other personal details to any part of the document. The results of the research project will be made available after 31 December 2013 at hughgoosen@gmail.com.

This survey forms part of a research project for the degree of Master of Theology at the South African Theological Seminary and is supervised by Dr. Christopher Peppler.

Thanking you in anticipation,

Hugh Goosen

Background questions

1. Which of the following four congregations are you associated with?

- Foresight Church ☐
- Community Church ☐
- Muldersdrift Union Church ☐
- NG Muldersdrift ☐

2. Do you consider yourself to be a Christian?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐

3. What is your gender?

- Male ☐
- Female ☐

4. What is your age?

- 18-30 ☐
- 31-40 ☐
- 41-50 ☐
- 51-60 ☐
- 61-70 ☐
- 71-80 ☐

The will of God

5. Consider the following scenario. You have a choice between two properties. They both meet your requirements and they are equally priced. One of the houses is in a better suburb and will offer a better return on investment. Unfortunately, it is further from your place of work, which will force you to commute. Do you think that (choose one):
- After prayerfully considering all of the variables, you are free and responsible to make the wisest choice ☐
 - You need to seek the will of God and discover which house is within God's plan for you to buy ☐
6. I have listed below three possible endings to a sentence. Please indicate your order of preference by marking what you believe to be the most important sentence ending with a 1 and the least important sentence ending with a 3.
- The single most important thing that I can do every day is to...*
- Seek, discover and obey whatever God would have me do today _____
 - Do my utmost to live in a way that is compliant with the Word of God _____
 - Spend time developing my relationship with my heavenly Father _____

Inward promptings

In John 14:26, Jesus states, 'The Holy Spirit...will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.' In chapter 16:13, He tells us that the Holy Spirit will 'guide you into all truth.' Many Christians believe that one of the ways that the Holy Spirit provides guidance is by means of 'inner promptings,' the 'inward witness' or the 'still, small voice.' Please consider the following scenario:

7. You are frustrated in your job and have been looking and praying for new work. You go for an interview and the potential employer thinks you are

perfect for the position. You receive a lucrative offer and on the surface, it seems your prayers have been answered. For some reason though, you get the impression that this is not the right job for you and that you should refuse the offer of employment. Would you (choose one):

- Consider the impression to be a revelation from God that requires a correct interpretation and obedience ☐
- Consider the impression to be a helpful suggestion, which is intended to point the way towards the wisest course of action ☐

8. Consider a recent instance where you believe the Holy Spirit to have given you an impression similar to the one mentioned in the previous question. How certain would you say you were that the prompting was of divine origin and not merely a product of your own imagination?

- Absolutely certain ☐
- Certain ☐
- Uncertain ☐
- Rather uncertain ☐

9. How likely do you think it is that God may be guiding you on a regular basis through inner promptings but that you are simply unaware of it?

- Extremely likely ☐
- Likely ☐
- Unlikely ☐
- Highly unlikely ☐

The nature of man

10. Traditionally, Pentecostals and Charismatics have taught that Christians must be baptised with the Holy Spirit because of a belief that it empowers Christians in a new way and equips them with spiritual gifts for ministry. Do you think that you need to be baptised with the Holy Spirit to be able to experience the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐
- Not sure ☐

11. Paul suggests that Christians should be regularly 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18). Do you suppose that by being filled with the Holy Spirit, you render yourself more inclined to receive and accurately discern divine guidance?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐
- Not sure ☐

12. Do you believe that you have (choose one option):

- One part – a material body, which functions as a cohesive whole ☐
- Two parts - a material body and an immaterial soul *or* spirit, or ☐
- Three parts - a body, soul *and* spirit ☐

Some authors recommend that you 'consult your spirit' when making decisions. This is because of a belief that the spirit of a Christian has been 'regenerated' or 'enlivened' by the Holy Spirit and is therefore sinless and totally reliable as a guide.

13. Do you think that the spirit of a Christian is sinless and a reliable guide?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐
- I don't know ☐

14. Do you think that it is actually possible to 'consult your spirit?'

- Yes ☐
- No ☐
- I don't know ☐

15. If you answered yes to the previous question, can you briefly explain how you go about consulting your spirit practically?

The spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit

There are a number of passages within Scripture that deal with the subject of God-given abilities, more commonly referred to as 'gifts.' Some gifts might be considered natural talents while others are often referred to as 'miraculous.'

16. Do you think that the gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-11 (a word of wisdom, a word of knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, tongues and interpretation), which are commonly referred to as the miraculous gifts (choose one):

- Were given for the establishment of the early church and ceased when the apostles died ☐
- Are still in operation today ☐

The Charismatic understanding of the gifts of words of wisdom and knowledge is that God provides spontaneous and miraculous revelatory insight into a situation, enabling the Christian to speak with wisdom or knowledge. Others believe that these gifts are not miraculous. Instead, over time, God develops wisdom and knowledge within the believer and when appropriate, enhances his ability to 'speak a wise word' or 'speak with knowledge' about a particular situation.

17. Choose the option that you believe best completes the following sentence.

A person becomes capable of speaking a word of wisdom or a word of knowledge when...

- The Holy Spirit provides miraculous revelatory insight into a situation ☐
- The Holy Spirit enhances the natural wisdom and knowledge a person has acquired over a lifetime and helps him to apply it to a situation ☐

Wayne Grudem (2000) explains that a healthy Evangelical understanding of prophecy is that it is the 'speaking of merely human words to report something that God has brought spontaneously to mind.' For Grudem (2000:142), modern day prophecy may include the prediction of future events (Acts 11:27-30; 21:11) or the disclosure of secret sins, anxieties and problems (1 Corinthians 14:24-25). Far more often, however, prophecy is quite subtle, including a simple statement of a known verse or fact.

18. Have you ever prophesied?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐

- I am not sure ☐
- Not aware that I can ☐

19. If you answered that you have prophesied before, how certain would you say you were that the prophecy was divinely inspired and not the product of your own imagination?

- Absolutely certain ☐
- Certain ☐
- Uncertain ☐
- Rather uncertain ☐

Richard Gaffin (1996:42) identifies prophecy as a 'revelatory' or 'word' gift. It is considered a word gift because it involves utterance or speaking. It is considered revelatory because in some opinions, prophecy is a vehicle that God uses to reveal things to Christians. Please consider the following scenario:

20. You have a close friend who has been considering full time ministry for a while. He seems to have a natural ability to teach but does not know if the timing is right for him to take on a pastoral role. He comes home from a holiday and tells you that while he was away, he visited a church and responded to an invitation for prayer. The person praying for him said, 'I believe that the Lord is telling you to leave your job and enter the ministry full time.' Would you encourage him to (choose one):

- Consider the prophecy to be a divine revelation that requires obedience ☐
- Evaluate the prophecy for conformity to the truth of Scripture and to prayerfully consider the instructions in light of all other variables ☐

Environment

21. Paul explains that the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to people as He pleases and for the common good or the edification of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). How much of a connection do you suppose there is between actively using your gifts in ministry and receiving divine guidance?

- A significant connection ☐
- A connection ☐
- An insignificant connection ☐
- No connection ☐

22. Which of the following do you think most people are more likely to pray for?

- Divine guidance to resolve personal problems and make wise decisions ☐
- Divine guidance for the edification of someone else and for the furtherance of the best interests of the Kingdom of God ☐

23. All Christians have no doubt found themselves in a position at some stage in their lives where they felt they could use some divine guidance. I have listed below a number of activities that I think most Christians have either contemplated doing or have actually done in an attempt to create an environment that would be conducive towards receiving divine guidance. With 1 being the first thing you would do and 7 being the last thing you would do, please would you indicate what you would do if you were in desperate need of an answer from God today?

- Pray
- Fast
- Meditate and contemplate
- Study the Bible
- Worship

- Exercise my gifts (Ministry) _____
- Seek counsel from friends _____

24. Here is another scenario. You attend a home cell meeting. The topic, which is open for discussion, is entitled 'The development of a discerning heart.' The home cell leader asks if anyone has any practical suggestions that might help others improve their sensitivity towards the Holy Spirit. Is there anything you could suggest?

25. What do you suppose some of the hindrances are to receiving divine guidance?

Hearing God

Some writers have suggested that certain criteria can be used to evaluate religious experience. By identifying criteria that are characteristic of the work of the Holy Spirit, Christians might be better equipped to differentiate between something that is divinely inspired and something that is simply a product of the human subconscious.

26. In your experience, which of the possible criteria listed below are relevant to this statement (you may choose more than one): *I believe that the Holy Spirit has just communicated with me because the experience...*

- Was confident and authoritative ☐
- Was powerful ☐
- Was reasonable ☐
- Was awe inspiring ☐
- Reminded me of a relevant passage of Scripture ☐
- Inspired a better understanding of Scripture ☐
- Was consistent with the truth of Scripture ☐
- Carried with it a sense of righteousness ☐
- Carried with it a sense of peacefulness ☐
- Was liberating ☐
- Brought healing ☐
- Provided encouragement ☐
- Inspired transformation and renewal ☐
- Inspired joy ☐
- Was edifying to me or others ☐
- Glorified Jesus Christ ☐
- Was random and unexpected ☐
- Was contrary to my natural thought processes ☐
- Was accompanied by a sense of urgency ☐
- Was unrelenting or persistent ☐
- Is constantly recurring ☐
- Inspired me to consider ways to resolve an unsettling issue ☐
- Convicted me of sinfulness ☐
- Other ☐

27. In addition to subjective impressions and spiritual gifts, there are a number of other vehicles of communication that God is believed to have made use of to communicate with His people throughout history. Please rate how possible you think it is that God would communicate with you using each of the following vehicles of communication. *1 = Very possible; 2 = Possible; 3 = Impossible*

- The creation (Nature) _____
- The written Word (Illumination of Scripture and Christian literature) _____
- The spoken word (Sermons) _____
- Christian music _____
- Circumstances _____
- Mature counsel (The opinions and advice of others) _____
- Dreams _____
- Visions _____
- An audible voice _____
- Journal keeping _____

The apostle Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 12:7 that when spiritual gifts are given, we are experiencing a 'manifestation of' or a 'showing forth' of the work of the Holy Spirit. Williams (1990:330) explains that when spiritual gifts operate in and through human beings, we are witnessing a dynamic self-disclosure of the Holy Spirit as He 'shines forth and openly shows Himself. The Spirit who is invisible now manifests Himself visibly and audibly.' What is also important to notice in Paul's words to the Corinthians is that a different manifestation of the Holy Spirit is given to each person. What this suggests is that the Holy Spirit reveals Himself in and through different people in different ways. My intention is to try and identify some common ways that manifestations of the Holy Spirit affect people physically, emotionally and rationally.

28. I have listed below all of the 'vehicles for religious experience' that have been addressed in the questions above. For each of those vehicles that you believe

Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire

to have personally experienced, please would you do your best to provide a few key words to describe the experience(s). Please pay particular attention to how the experience(s) affected your entire person. In other words, how were you affected physically (did you have any bodily side effects), emotionally (how did you feel) and rationally (what went through your mind)? A person who believes he has experienced the gift of healing might, for example, write: *Overwhelming compassion, a sense of urgency to obey the biblical mandate to pray for the sick and a tingling sensation in the hands.* Boxes that you feel are not applicable can be left blank.

<i>Vehicle for religious experience</i>	<i>What did you actually experience?</i>
<i>Inner prompting</i>	
<i>Word of wisdom</i>	
<i>Word of knowledge</i>	
<i>Faith</i>	

Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire

<i>Healing</i>	
<i>Miraculous powers</i>	
<i>Prophecy</i>	
<i>Interpretation of prophecy</i>	
<i>Distinguishing between spirits</i>	
<i>Tongues</i>	

Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire

<i>The interpretation of tongues</i>	
<i>Creation (Nature)</i>	
<i>The written Word (Scriptures)</i>	
<i>Christian literature</i>	
<i>The spoken word (Sermons)</i>	

Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire

<i>Christian music</i>	
<i>Circumstances</i>	
<i>Mature counsel</i> <i>(The opinions and advice of others)</i>	
<i>Dreams</i>	
<i>Visions</i>	
<i>Audible voice</i>	

<i>Journal</i>	
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General questions

29. Do you think that you (tick appropriate):

- Need to learn to recognise and know the voice of God? ☐
- Will simply and definitely know the voice of God when you hear it? ☐

The apostle Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 14:25 that true prophecy can result in the disclosure of some rather clear and precise details - the secrets of a person's heart could very well be laid bare! Whether we believe prophecy to be applicable in the church today or not, some people seem to show evidence of a remarkable sensitivity towards the Holy Spirit. A good example is the popular account of how Charles Spurgeon paused during a sermon, pointed to the gallery and said, 'Young man, the gloves in your pocket are not paid for!'

30. If you have ever witnessed the kind of inexplicable insight that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 14:25, how much would you say your sense of expectation was affected with regards to being able to perceive clear and precise details when the Holy Spirit communicates with you?

- Quite significantly ☐
- A little ☐
- Hardly at all ☐
- Not applicable ☐

31. If you have done everything you could possibly think of to position yourself to hear clearly from God and, in your opinion, have not heard from Him, how has your failing to hear from Him affected your relationship with Him?

32. Do you think that there is a need for Christians to thoroughly explain that which they have actually experienced when sharing an experience of divine direction or communication with others?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐
- It doesn't really bother me ☐

33. Do you think you and your church would benefit from a theologically based course on the various ways in which God speaks to His people with a clear description of that which the average Christian can expect to experience?

- Yes ☐
- No ☐

Appendix 2

Interview summaries

Chris Zeelie

Chris Zeelie is commonly referred to as the visionary leader of the team of elders that lead Foresight Church. The church forms part of a church-planting network called New Covenant Ministries International, which is a relationship network of friends with the same mission to make disciples of all nations and to demonstrate the life of Christ practically in every sphere of life. With a focus upon fivefold ministry, the priesthood of all believers, the continuation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and an adherence to the biblical mandate to evangelise all nations, Zeelie classifies the church as Neo-Charismatic or Third Wave.

The will of God

Zeelie draws something from each of the major schools of thought on the will of God. From Jeremiah 29:11 and Acts 17:26, he asserts that 'there is a divine orchestration for our exact time and space.' God has a specific will for each believer and it would be wise, productive and beneficial for us to seek out His will. At the same time, however, we must remember that 'not everything is meant to be directive – we don't work for God but with God.' Zeelie truly strikes a balance between each of the perspectives on the will of God when he states that 'the key to understanding these concepts is son-ship.' In finding the heart of God, we will also invariably find His will. Likewise, if we love God, we will also be inclined to obey His commands.

Certainty of divine direction

Zeelie disagrees with the assumption that because divine direction is subjective, we cannot know with any level of certainty whether the direction is inspired by the Holy

Spirit. For Zeelie, 'Nothing is entirely subjective – it has to be interpreted through a lens.' The lens, he explains, is the Word of God, the character and the nature of Christ, the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit witnessing with our conscience, an outward recognition by the corporate community and a spirit of edification and love. In cases where Zeelie has personally experienced divine communication, he professes a one hundred percent confidence that the experiences were divinely inspired. The trouble, he explains, is not with the accuracy of the divine communication but with the human interpretation of that which has been communicated. 'God speaks all the time,' he states, 'but we are not always tuned in.'

Authority of divine direction

Zeelie explains that whether or not divine direction is requiring of obedience is wholly dependent upon the scenario one is faced with. He states that Christians 'have to assume that God does not gossip.' If God intends to communicate something to us, He will communicate clearly and unambiguously and the requisite response to the communication will be clear and evident. Zeelie expressed an aversion to the use of the word 'obey' and suggested that God does not require obedience as much as He requires a 'working with.'

The nature of man

From Acts 1:8, Zeelie explains that Holy Spirit baptism is an 'equipping for a task.' As one is then regularly filled with the Holy Spirit, one becomes more and more inclined to be led by and to accurately discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In terms of our makeup, Zeelie believes that we are triune beings but does not consider the human spirit to be either sinless or consultable. Instead, the Holy Spirit communicates with the human spirit and the human spirit then becomes 'the filter through which you understand the work of the Holy Spirit.' So as we look within, we are not consulting our own spirit but the Holy Spirit Who dwells within us.

Environment

Zeelie believes that an atmosphere of worship and close proximity to others who operate in the gifts of the Holy Spirit will have a positive effect upon one's ability to enjoy a similar experience. Prolonged exposure to negative media can be counterproductive and have a detrimental effect upon one's sensitivity towards the Holy Spirit. People should, however, be capable of functioning within their gifting regardless of whether or not they are within a religious environment. In fact, people should become more capable of functioning within their gifting when they respond to the biblical mandate to 'go and make disciples of all nations.' Finally, the primary ingredient for the development of a discerning heart is love - we improve our sensitivity towards the Holy Spirit as we cultivate an attitude of love for others.

Objective criteria

For Zeelie, the primary question we need to ask ourselves when we are trying to discern whether an experience was divinely inspired or not is whether the experience will ultimately bring one closer to God and closer to others. The voice of the Holy Spirit is not necessarily always confident, authoritative or even reasonable. Neither is it commonly random and unexpected or even contrary to one's natural thought processes. His voice is, however, always edifying and it will always promote healing, transformation and renewal.

It is also very common for the voice of the Holy Spirit to glorify Christ, to inspire joy, and to remind one of pertinent passages of Scripture. The Holy Spirit can sometimes aid a person who is still learning to recognise His voice by ensuring that the communication is unrelenting, persistent and recurring. The new believer may very well experience a sense of urgency, but when one starts to become more obedient to the Holy Spirit, 'He doesn't need to be as intense as He used to be.' Finally, from Philippians 4:7, which states, 'And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus,' Zeelie

identifies an 'illogical peace' as perhaps the final assurance that one has indeed heard from God.

Actual experiences

I asked Zeelie to provide a few key words that were indicative of his own experience of each of the vehicles of communication covered in the survey. His responses were as follows:

- Inward promptings – *joy and fear*
- Word of wisdom – *the application of knowledge in a life giving manner*
- Word of knowledge – *certain knowledge; sometimes pictures; sometimes dates and times; sometimes you can feel an emotion for somebody*
- Gift of faith – *happens in daily living; rock solid faith that God will come through*
- Gift of healing – *heat over your whole body; feel a person's actual pain; compassion; sometimes nothing because healing works in the category of the faith gifts*
- Miraculous powers – *Signs and wonders; miraculous outcomes, such as restored sight; an ability to face a supernatural confrontation*
- Prophecy – *Pictures or visions*
- Interpretation of prophecy – *same as word of wisdom*
- Distinguishing between spirits – *interpretation of a person's character; identification of demonic spirits; something jars inside of you; an ability to see, smell and even hear demons speak; physical manifestations, for example, face changing and unnatural bodily movements*
- Tongues – *part of our inheritance as the children of God; for personal edification; done at will and not an ecstatic utterance; the speaking of an unknown language*
- Interpretation of tongues – *same phenomena as prophecy or a word of knowledge; recognition of an actual language*

- Creation – *understanding; awe; majesty; metaphors; understanding aspects of God through physical things, for example, an understanding of the trinity through a bougainvillea*
- The written Word – *words jump out at you; joy; faith; peace; an 'a-ha' moment*
- Christian literature – *God does not often speak to him through Christian literature*
- The spoken Word – *conviction; faith; understanding and enlightenment; logical conclusion; an 'a-ha' moment*
- Christian music – *overwhelming emotion; tears*
- Circumstances – *God does guide through circumstances; we should be careful to read too much into our circumstances; God is sovereign over circumstance*
- Mature counsel – *two or three witnesses agreeing; not necessarily what you want to hear*
- Dreams – *easily distinguishable from regular dreams; almost like a documentary vs. a feel-good movie; easy to remember in crystal clear detail; references and verses*
- Visions – *picture in your mind; sometimes it can block out physical vision; blocks out reality; becomes a greater reality; unfolding of a scene or movie next to you; imagination plays a factor*
- Audible voice – *voice like a trumpet; like rushing waters; loud; huge authority; crystal clear; incredible peace; no doubt*
- Journals – *does not keep journals*

Craig Rowe

Craig Rowe occupied the position of senior pastor at Community Ministries in Muldersdrift for fifteen years before stepping down in 2011. Rowe has a passion for education and community development and currently serves as the Head of Community Engagement at Monash University South Africa. Rowe still serves on the board of elders at Community Ministries and explains that the church forms part of a

cluster of churches that is affiliated to Church of the Nations. The Church of the Nations is overseen internationally by what is referred to as an Apostolic Council. Their statement of faith includes a belief in the privilege and responsibility of all believers to respond to the command to receive the power of the Holy Spirit for holy and victorious living. They believe furthermore that the Holy Spirit operates through gifts, ministries and manifestations to glorify Christ in the world.

The will of God

Rowe responded to my enquiry into his perspective on the will of God by unreservedly stating, 'I would definitely have a centrist perspective.' He explained that by focusing only upon one perspective, 'you nullify a lot of the other deep processes.' He agrees with the traditional view in that God has a personal and unique plan for each and every individual. He agrees with the wisdom perspective and states that 'Scripture has got to be the basis of everything.' He sides with those who emphasise the gifts of the Holy Spirit when he says, 'we believe fully in the gifts of the Holy Spirit being functional in our lives today in every moment.' Finally, however, he explains that 'all of these things are only possible out of a relationship.'

Certainty of divine direction

Rowe draws a distinction between divine direction, which is most commonly communal and progressive and divine communication through a spiritual gift, which can be immediate and certain. He made use of the example of how they came to decide upon a name for their church to illustrate his point. At the outset, they were called Abundant Life. Rowe, however, felt that they needed to start afresh. He believed that God was encouraging him to consider what it was that illustrated who they were. His response was that they were a group of people who really had a heart for the community. He then began to feel impelled to consider what it was that they were called to do. His response to this was quite simply that they needed to minister. After discussing the matter with another leader in the church, they both agreed to

consult with the board of elders. All in agreement, they concluded that their focus was to be upon ministering to the community and decided to call the church Community Ministries. In this case, then, God communicated over a period of time, steering the hearts and minds of the oversight towards a specific conclusion that was compliant with Scripture.

In cases where Rowe has functioned within spiritual word gifts, he expresses a high level of certainty of divine inspiration. 'I don't recall ever bringing a prophetic word,' he explains, 'when I wasn't sure that's what God was saying. I would only have spoken if I really believed it was from the Lord.' Rowe adds that while there is always the possibility that one might speak mistakenly, he finds that he is convinced of the need to speak when he has nothing to gain by doing so.

Authority of divine direction

Rowe explains that before one responds to what one believes to have been a divine prompting one must ensure that it lines up with a thorough and logical interpretation of Scripture. He uses the real life example of poverty to illustrate his point. We know from Scripture that we have been commanded to care for the widows and the orphans (James 1:27). Often, we find ourselves facing poverty-stricken people at busy intersections, begging for assistance. We might be forgiven if a recollection of James 1:27 and a sense of compassion are confused for a divine prompting to give something to such people. It has been proven, however, that this apparently simple and immediate solution to the problem is in fact quite destructive. A far more logical and balanced approach would be to find ways to empower such people to find their way out of poverty. Secondly, Rowe explains that any decision taken must be compliant with the counsel of other mature believers. Only when others within the body of Christ can relate to and confirm that which we believe God to have communicated to us should we begin to think and pray more seriously about the relevant course of action.

The nature of man

For Rowe, a person who has experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit in the Charismatic sense, as a secondary experience, is not better equipped to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit than the person who has not. What is more important is that to be effectively guided by the Holy Spirit, one must be regularly filled with the Holy Spirit. Quite simply, if you do not ask to be filled, 'you will be barren and dry.' Rowe disagrees with the understanding that the regenerate human spirit is consultable as a sinless and reliable guide. He explains that this interpretation is not at all in line with Scripture and is not based upon good theological foundations. In fact, he labels any such teaching as 'heresy, bordering upon witchcraft.' Being someone that holds to a trichotomist perspective, he understands how the misconception began. He explains, however, that while we are comprised of three parts, all three parts function in unity – we cannot separate spirit from body and soul.

Environment

Rowe explained that one can grow in one's gift by immersing oneself in an environment where the same gift is functioning. Personally, he functions most effectively in the gift of prophecy when he is part of a prophetic team. He believes, however, that the gifts of the Holy Spirit do not function only within religious settings. Instead, if a person functions in a gift, that person will function in the gift whenever and wherever it becomes necessary. When I asked what advice he would give to someone who expressed a desire to grow in terms of their sensitivity towards the Holy Spirit, he explained that he would encourage the person to 'grow in servanthood.' Finally, some of the hindrances to receiving divine guidance would include pride, self-centred agendas and a self-defacing, wrongful perspective about one's value and usability within the Kingdom.

Objective criteria

When asked if he has observed any specific criteria that have been characteristic of the work of the Holy Spirit in his life, Rowe explained that ‘in different contexts there are different responses.’ He explained that sensitivity to the conviction of the Holy Spirit for sinfulness is an on-going process that should happen on a daily basis and serves as a basis for God to continue to work with and to utilise a person. Once we recognise and deal with the things we have been convicted about, we allow the Holy Spirit the freedom to communicate further with us and we begin to move on to function more effectively within our gifting. Different gifts, again, will have different criteria that characterise them and we can only begin to recognise those criteria if we have been given a specific gift. Rowe reiterates, however, that as a general rule, the Holy Spirit communicates progressively with us, over a period of time. Perhaps the best evidence of the fact that God has spoken to and dealt with an individual is the presence of ‘sustained and on-going fruit of what God started.’

Actual experiences

Rowe explained that while God is multi-faceted and speaks in multiple ways, most people will not experience all of the vehicles of communication listed in the survey. Scripture will always remain God’s primary vehicle of choice to communicate with believers. Thereafter, each person will be inclined to experience God communicating with them through one or two of the remaining vehicles of communication. Of the vehicles listed, Rowe commented on the following:

- Inner prompting – *often a good idea, jotted down and considered progressively, over time; compliant with Scripture and the counsel of other believers; often related to how one is walking in accountability*
- Word of wisdom – *supernatural insight for counselling and direction*
- Word of knowledge – *revelatory; given by God; lines up with all the perimeters of Scripture; brings immediate and specific direction*

- Gift of faith – *supernatural power to take each step and do things he could never do in his own strength*
- Gift of healing - *encouragement*
- Miraculous powers – *believes the Holy Spirit gives it but has not experienced it personally*
- Prophecy – *when received, it often happened when he was in a time of question; when given, it is not really a picture but more of a heartfelt expression; most effective outside of the local church; very personal in nature; provides promises for the future*
- Distinguishing between spirits - *discernment*
- Tongues – *faith driven; once received, just trust the Lord and walk in it*
- Creation – *pleasant to look at but God does not really communicate with him through creation*
- The written Word (Scriptures) – *must always be primary for everyone*
- Christian literature – *great insight, direction and encouragement*
- Christian music – *dynamic insight during worship*
- Circumstances – *inspires him to think about and respond to the Holy Spirit*
- Dreams – *one is woken up; not a regular dream; felt impelled to write it down; can remember the content clearly; more personal than for somebody else*
- Visions – *has never seen a picture; more of a disclosure of what could be, the seeing of potential or the 'bigger picture'*
- Audible voice – *has not heard the audible voice of God as a booming voice*

Dr. Kevin Roy

As an ordained minister with the Baptist Union of Southern Africa, Dr. Kevin Roy has served at both the Wilro Park Baptist Church in Roodepoort as well as the Emmaus Baptist Church in Centurion, Pretoria. Roy has over twenty years of experience as a lecturer of theology at both UNISA and the Cape Town Baptist Seminary. His area of expertise is Church History, Systematic Theology and Missiology. In 2007, Roy accepted the position of full time pastor at the Muldersdrift Union Church. In addition

to fulfilling this role, Roy currently lectures part time at the Baptist Theological College of Southern Africa. While Roy retains a strong bond with the Baptist Union of Southern Africa, their church is not a Baptist Union church and could be classified as Independent Evangelical.

The will of God

Roy explains that the deepest desire of every Christian should be to want to know and do the will of God. If that is not our desire, we are not Christians. He adds, furthermore, that each and every true believer, almost by default, will experience the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God leads us in His will not because of anything we do but simply because of His mercy and grace, because He is our Father and because we are His children. Roy explains that to some extent, divine guidance and knowing the will of God is not just about identifying the things that we need to do to discern His will – it is bigger than that. He shows that it includes living in His will, practicing holiness and obedience and being filled with the Spirit. ‘If I am seeking first His kingdom and His righteousness,’ he states, ‘I almost don’t have to worry too much because my decisions will be right.’ In essence, then, Roy holds a strong relational view, echoing the sentiments of Augustine, who said, ‘Love God, do what you want.’

Certainty of divine direction

Roy is very careful about his own ability to confidently say ‘this is God’s will.’ He has always struggled with decision making. In almost every major decision that he has faced in his life, he explains that there has been an element of doubt involved as to whether or not the decision was compliant with the will of God. All he could do was search his heart for any false, evil motives and then simply pray and trust that the Lord had led him in a particular direction. In fact, the only decision that he has ever made that was accompanied by an astonishing sense of peace and conviction was his decision to take the role of pastor in Muldersdrift. He reiterates, however, that ‘If someone was to say to me, “Do you know one hundred percent infallibly sure that

you did not make a mistake,” I would be hesitant to saying it that strongly. I am hesitant to claim divine guidance, totally and unreservedly, almost about anything.’

Authority of divine direction

Roy explains that being guided by the Holy Spirit is not a purely rational or cerebral exercise. The simple knowing and application of Scriptural principles is not enough. For him, ‘It doesn’t work that easily – it is far more complex.’ He therefore takes inward inclinations, burdens or recurring thoughts very seriously. He states,

‘I give a lot of acknowledgment to inward promptings – how else does God make His will known to us? Some things are clear, straight from the Scripture, but the Scripture is in a way very limited. The Scripture tells me I can’t lust after my neighbour’s wife but it doesn’t tell me whether I must come to Muldersdrift or not.’

Guidance by means of inward promptings, he explains, operates in degrees. While one may feel quite strongly about a certain direction, one may later experience a greater level of certainty or assurance of divine inspiration. This is especially the case when a particular course of action yields a good result. From Romans 7:23, however, Roy hastens to provide what he refers to not as a cynical but as a realistic and sober observation. There always remains a sinful dimension and the spirit and the flesh will forever strive and struggle against one another. Because we are fallible and influenced by pride, we should be hesitant to label any inward inclination as a definite, authoritative instruction from the Lord.

The nature of man

Roy differs from the Charismatic assumption that Holy Spirit baptism is required for powerful and effective ministry and discernment. Something that all Christians are required to do, however, is to be regularly and repeatedly filled with the Holy Spirit. It

is as we are obedient towards the command to walk according to the Spirit that we become more likely to receive God's guidance.

While Roy is averse to an overly dogmatic opinion regarding the makeup of man, he inclines more towards a dichotomist than a trichotomist perspective. He states, 'I incline more to the broader view that there is a material, physical dimension to us but there is also an immaterial, spiritual dimension to us.' He explains that while there are instances within Scripture where the words 'soul' and 'spirit' are used with an indication of some distinction, there are other instances where they are used interchangeably. For him, though, the trichotomist position is slightly less appealing simply because it is a little too cut-and-dried in its understanding of what is clearly a complex and multifaceted creature.

Environment

When considered within the context of Roy's commitment to the primacy of relationship, the question of how we might go about improving our sensitivity towards the Holy Spirit is easily answered. Again, we do not become capable of accurately discerning the will of God by almost ritualistically identifying and doing certain things. Rather, we become sensitive to His guidance when, out of a love for God, we regularly commune with Him and live lives that are compliant with Scriptural commands and precepts. The person who does not, he cautions, who is perhaps unrepentant, negligent or self-indulgent, is in danger of making decisions, honestly believing they were inspired by God, which ultimately lead to destruction.

Objective criteria

After considering all of the possible objective criteria I listed, Roy identified every one of them as a possible indication of the work of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, not one of them is necessarily a guarantee of the genuine work of the Holy Spirit.

'I am reminded here,' Roy explains, 'of Jonathan Edward's valuable comments in his 'A treatise concerning religious affections.' In that work, he lists a large number of phenomena and criteria that cannot be used to prove a particular experience is, or is not, from the Holy Spirit.'

Referring to the second chapter of the book, he drew my attention in particular to points 5, 10 and 11. The first point states that 'It is no sign that religious affections are truly holy and spiritual, or that they are not, that they come with texts of Scripture, remarkably brought to the mind' (Edwards 2012:46). The second point similarly suggests that 'Nothing can be certainly known of the nature of religious affections by this, that they much dispose persons with their mouths to praise and glorify God' (Edwards 2012:67). Perhaps most startling for Roy is Edwards' eleventh point, which he kindly paraphrased as follows: 'It does not prove that our emotions are spiritual, or unspiritual, if they produce assurance of salvation' (2012:69).

Actual experiences

When I asked Roy to comment on the possible vehicles of communication addressed within the study, he explained that because of his theological context, he has not personally experienced many of them. He did, however, offer the following comments:

- Inward prompting - *sense of peace; an inclining of the heart; a growing feeling or urge that cannot be suppressed; a burden; comes to your mind again and again; regretful if ignored*
- Word of wisdom – *sanctified, Spirit-led wisdom; a wise word*
- Word of knowledge – *sanctified, Spirit-led knowledge; a knowledgeable word*
- Prophecy – *can happen during times of impassioned preaching, praise and worship*
- Distinguishing between spirits – *spiritual discernment is certainly extremely necessary and valuable today*
- Creation – *speaks of the glory of God*

- The written Word (Scripture) – *definitely, primarily*
- Christian literature – *without any doubt much used of the Spirit in promoting life, doctrine, growth and renewal*
- The spoken word (sermons) – *convicts, converts and regenerates*
- Christian music – *much and often used of the Spirit in promoting spiritual life, especially when the words embrace solid gospel truths*
- Circumstances – *possible, but requires discernment*
- Mature counsel – *certainly a means used by God for spiritual progress*
- Dreams – *possible, but requires careful discernment*
- Visions – *possible, but requires careful discernment*
- Audible voice – *can't rule it out but very cautious, generally sceptical of such claims*
- Journals – *in the same category as prayer*

Ds. Neels Kloppers

After graduating from Potchefstroom University, Ds. Neels Kloppers served for eight years at the NG Krugersdorp East before moving to the NG Muldersdrift in 1994, where he has served to date. He is currently the chairman of a number of organisations that add value in the local community. These include the Makarios Trust, which provides financial aid to children and elderly in need, Christ Kids, which places youth workers within schools, and the area committee of the NG Welfare, which provides impoverished people with food, clothing and counselling. Members of his congregation lovingly refer to him as a pillar of the community.

The will of God

When asked which of the perspectives on the will of God he associates most strongly with, Kloppers stated that the positions are not mutually exclusive – one cannot hold to one without the other. He explained that if one does not foster a meaningful relationship with God, diligently study His Word and remain consistently

obedient to His precepts, one simply cannot do His will. Pointing towards part of the Lord's suggested prayer in Matthew 6:10, he showed that the will of God is perhaps most easily discerned when the believer maintains a kingdom perspective. He stated that the will of God 'can never be fully realised in your life if you do not make Him King over your life, allowing Him sovereign reign and an influence in everything that you do.' While Kloppers appears to be predominantly relationship orientated, his appreciation of the fundamentals of the wisdom perspective renders him centrist.

Certainty of divine direction

Kloppers explains that Christians have an ability to choose whether or not they are obedient to the direction of the Holy Spirit. This suggests that we cannot be oblivious to God's dealings with us. We can only be either attentive and responsive to or inattentive and neglectful of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. What is very dangerous, he counters, is assuming a level of absolute certainty regarding the content of a divine communication. He is very dubious of the individual who confidently proclaims, 'So says the Lord.' He therefore echoes the sentiment of one of his university professors, Dr. Malan Nel, who often said, 'Given all of the revealed information at my disposal, this is what I believe the Lord is saying.'

As a general rule, he explains that 'the closer you live to God and the more focused you are, the better the chances are that you will hear Him.' He does not believe that God speaks in riddles or that He takes any pleasure in our uncertainty. God has gone to great lengths to provide us with Scripture. In addition, He believes that God continues to communicate through dreams, prophecy and the like because He intends for us to be certain regarding His will for us. Kloppers refers to 1 John 5:13, one of John's purpose statements for the writing of his letter, to show that it is not God's intention for us to live with constant uncertainty of His will for us. Here John states, 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.'

Authority of divine direction

Kloppers states that part of the benefit of having the Holy Spirit as another Comforter is that we can trust Him to guide us. Discerning the guidance of the Holy Spirit, however, is not quite as simple as it seems. 'Firstly, I need to live in a relationship with Him,' he explains, 'so that I can learn to know His voice. If I am in doubt, I cannot proceed – I need to seek further clarification.' Secondly, he explains that God has given us the gift of wisdom and that it is our responsibility to weigh all of the facts objectively and unselfishly and to ask ourselves what course of action is within the best interests of the kingdom of God. Thereafter, when one does experience a genuine sense of conviction of divine instruction, one cannot simply do with it as one pleases. He states, 'You will be disobedient if you do not comply.'

While Kloppers would therefore generally consider the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be progressive and mediate, facilitated by the study of Scripture, circumstance and the counsel of other mature believers, he is also fully open to the possibility that God may speak immediately. In the one instance where Kloppers believes to have been given a word of prophecy, for example, he experienced both a high level of certainty of divine inspiration and a compulsion to act. He says, 'I am reasonably sure it was God because it was not something that I would do very easily.'

The nature of man

Kloppers considers the suggestion that the spirit of man is sinless and consultable to be unscriptural and blasphemous. He shows from Jeremiah 17:9 and Proverbs 28:26 that the heart of a human being is corrupt, unreliable and beyond cure and that the person who unreservedly trusts his own heart is a fool. Jesus Himself warned against the condition of the human heart when he said, 'For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.' Kloppers states, therefore, that 'we are not to trust our own hearts because we can have inner peace while not doing the will of God.' With regards to the baptism of the

Holy Spirit, he is unwaveringly classical-Reformed in his belief that it occurs once at conversion and that we receive multiple infillings thereafter.

Environment

Kloppers explains that God communicates with all people and that no one person is more deserving of His communication than the next person. Ministers simply enjoy the privilege of having more time at their disposal to pray and to study the Word of God. Simply by virtue of their vocation, therefore, they invariably end up 'living close to the heart of God' and are more inclined to have their 'eyes and ears open to the work of the Holy Spirit.' He continues to show that simply by moving within the right influential circles, the believer does not automatically become more inclined to perceive the work of the Holy Spirit. Christians will always retain their free will and can choose to be disobedient, disqualifying themselves from God's guidance. Finally, Kloppers' primary recommendation for the person who seeks to become more discerning of the voice of the Spirit is to eliminate as many hindrances as possible and to simply become quiet. In his own life, he escapes from the overstimulation that modern technology brings by taking hunting trips. 'Every year I go,' he shares, 'I have had an experience that has enriched my life.'

Objective criteria

While Kloppers felt that each of the objective criteria listed could potentially serve as an indication of the work of the Holy Spirit, he took the time to consider and comment upon each of them in turn. His observations were as follows:

- Was confident and authoritative – *definitely*
- Was reasonable – *faith is not always reasonable; sometimes it is unreasonable*
- Was awe inspiring – *most of the time, yes, but sometimes it saddens*
- Reminded me of a relevant passage of Scripture – *certainly*
- Inspired a better understanding of Scripture – *definitely*

- Was consistent with the truth of Scripture – *definitely*
- Carried with it a sense of righteousness – *righteous by whose margins? Our perspectives regarding righteousness are not necessarily the same as God's*
- Carried with it a sense of peacefulness – *sometimes the opposite; uneasy at times*
- Was liberating – *definitely; sometimes the opposite*
- Brought healing – *yes; other times definitely not*
- Provided encouragement – *definitely*
- Inspired transformation and renewal – *yes*
- Inspired joy – *yes*
- Was edifying to me or others – *yes*
- Glorified Jesus Christ – *if Jesus Christ is not glorified, it wasn't the work of the Holy Spirit*
- Was random and unexpected – *maybe for us, yes; God does not work randomly – all His work is purposefully and intentionally executed*
- Was contrary to my natural thought processes – *yes, it can be quite against one's natural process of thinking*
- Was accompanied by a sense of urgency – *there must be a sense of seriousness or urgency*
- Was unrelenting or persistent – *Kloppers has had personal experience of this; can be unrelenting when one is unresponsive*
- Is constantly recurring – *God has a pursuant love for us – He never leaves us alone until we understand that which He intends for us to know*
- Inspired me to consider ways to resolve an unsettling issue – *yes*
- Convicted me of sinfulness – *yes, the Holy Spirit must convict; He sets us free but He also binds us; liberty without obedience is confusion and lawlessness*

Actual experiences

Kloppers showed from 1 Corinthians 12:11 that the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts to people as He chooses. He alone will decide which gift each person will have.

No two people will experience precisely the same gifts in precisely the same way and no one person can have all of the gifts. While he therefore could not have had a personal experience of each of the vehicles of communication listed, he provided the following comments on each of them:

- Inward prompting – *seeing the bigger picture clearly, as though he had seen something for the first time; to become capable of expressing something that was previously inexpressible; an empowerment for change; resilience to stand by that which one believes to have been communicated*
- Word of wisdom – *inexplicable; contrary to natural plans or strategy; clear in retrospect*
- Word of knowledge – *a sudden and surprising knowing of something that one did not know before; cannot explain where the knowledge came from*
- Gift of faith – *compulsion to do something that one may be averse to doing; a refreshing or revitalising certainty*
- Gift of healing – *has never seen anyone healed as a result of his prayer for healing*
- Miraculous powers – *has never had such an experience*
- Prophecy – *the feeling of an emotion that he believed another person to be feeling; has not seen a verse or a picture; high level of certainty; not something that he does very easily*
- Interpretation of prophecy – *the seeing of potential; something becomes obvious; cannot understand how you missed it before*
- Distinguishing between spirits – *has never experienced this*
- Tongues – *has not received the gift; people can delude themselves into believing they have received it; he is not averse to the use of glossolalia to express the inexpressible to God during praise and worship*
- Interpretation of tongues – *has never experienced this*
- Creation – *totally humbling; the seeing of the bigger picture; reminds us of God's omnipotence*

- The written Word (Scripture) – *provides deeper insight into who God is; better understanding of His love, forgiveness, grace, mercy and kindness; the more time spent in His Word, the better one will get to know Him*
- Christian literature – *the seeing of things that he perhaps never would have seen himself*
- The spoken word (sermons) – *the voicing of the voice of God so that others can understand it*
- Christian music – *God communicates very strongly with him through music; provides a sense of God's love and greatness; understanding of ones shortcomings; enables him to see both God and himself more clearly*
- Circumstances – *forces him to think and to listen differently; one needs to make the choice to see God in the circumstances and to respond accordingly*
- Mature counsel – *confirmation or conviction*
- Dreams – *does not happen often; absolutely sure that it is not a regular dream; can be clearly remembered as much as thirty years later*
- Visions – *has never had a vision*
- Audible voice – *believes it is possible but has never heard the audible voice of God*
- Journals – *does not keep journals but believes that it is a choice to see God in the records that you have kept*

Sam Ngoma

Sam Ngoma has dedicated himself to more than 25 years of service in the Muldersdrift area. He has served as a pastor at Outreach Community Ministries since May 1988 and Community Ministries since June 2008. He is the current project manager at the Muldersdrift Children's Home and is also a member of the Umnotho Village Project, a self-help project, empowering locals to build their own homes. Ngoma is currently working towards an advanced diploma in theological studies and has a passion for preaching.

The will of God

I asked Ngoma how he would prioritise the following three aspects of Christian life: (A) to seek, discover and obey whatever God would have you do, (B) to live in a way that is compliant with Scripture, and (C) to foster a deep and meaningful relationship with God. He responded by explaining that the primary responsibility of any believer should be to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). Despite his dedication to the fundamentals of the traditional view, however, he proceeded to express a commitment to the importance of relationship as well. This suggests that he is perhaps best classified as centrist:

‘Relationship is also very, very crucial. When you are filled with the Holy Spirit, you have a connection with God. You wouldn’t be able to move forward unless there is this relationship, whereby at any given time you could just stop and say, “Lord, what do I do?” And there and then, you will get a direction.’

Certainty of divine direction

When asked how he differentiates between direction that is divinely inspired and something that was born out of his own consciousness, Ngoma responded by saying that ‘you need to look at the fruit or the outcome, which may sometimes be immediate, or may come after a long time.’ The person in need of clear and certain direction needs to be constantly asking questions of God. Believers should constantly be looking for confirmation and evidence to validate the direction that they believe God has instructed them to take. He explains, ‘When it is God, it agrees with Scripture. Then you watch until you receive confirmation. I do not act until I have confirmation.’

I asked Ngoma if he thinks there is a need for different terminology in the church with regards to how we share our experience of the voice of God with others. He suggested that there should be no need for people to change their terminology if they are absolutely certain that God has spoken. He says,

'I know the voice of God when I hear it. Unless I am one hundred and twenty percent sure, I would not stand up and say, "God said." For me, in most cases, when God has spoken, He has spoken, and I wouldn't be ashamed to say, "God spoke this to me."

Authority of divine direction

Ngoma explains that God often communicates with him by means of inward promptings. He suggests, however, that they are primarily non-revelatory and should only be considered to be suggestive, helping to point a person in the right direction.

'I consider promptings mainly to give direction. A prompting wouldn't come just for the sake of coming. When it comes, it is there to provide direction, to provide insight into something that you are probably busy meditating on or seeking answers for.'

Ngoma would normally only consider a particular course of action to have been divinely inspired and requiring of obedience when he sees enough factors coming together to simultaneously facilitate and provide confirmation of the course of action. It is important to note, however, that in cases where he has experienced the audible voice of God and where the required course of action is clearly disclosed, the requisite response is immediately evident and he does not hesitate to obey.

The nature of man

Ngoma believes that Holy Spirit baptism is necessary if the believer is to become capable of recognising the voice of the Holy Spirit. He believes that human beings are triune in nature and that the regenerate spirit is sinless. He explains, 'At conversion, there is a re-creation or regeneration, and that is ongoing; that is the connection that we have – you connect with God through your spirit.' He is averse, however, to the idea that the regenerate spirit is to be consulted as a guide. Rather, he explains that,

‘If your spirit is re-created, if you are seeking after God’s will, if you are praying and if you are constantly spending time on the spiritual side of things, that would have an impact to reduce the fleshly side. So it depends where you are spending your time mostly. If your spiritual life is more important, then you are walking in the spirit and are constantly connected with God.’

Environment

Ngoma explains that Christians can expect to receive divine direction regardless of whether or not they move within the right influential circles and are committed to ministry. ‘It is more about your lifestyle; if you read the Word and you pray and you obey God, I believe that you are connected with Him and the revelation will come.’

Although he had already recommended that we strive to seek God and make a conscious effort to be constantly aware of His influence, I asked Ngoma if there was anything else that he could recommend for the development of a discerning heart. He responded by saying that ‘you need to take the time to switch off, clear your mind and just listen. You need to go completely silent for a period of time and allow God to speak. That is when I am able to really connect and hear the voice of God.’

Objective criteria

Reading through the possible objective criteria listed, Ngoma identified some to be more relevant to his life than others. Like some of the other ministers, he explained that the type of experience one has is largely dependent upon the situation. While he felt quite strongly that the communication of the Holy Spirit often carries with it a strong sense of peace, at other times the Holy Spirit does the very opposite and convicts us. ‘Sometimes,’ he says, ‘you could be entertaining a thought that is ungodly and the Spirit of God would immediately deal with that.’ Perhaps the most helpful objective exercise, Ngoma explains, ‘is seeking His will all the time; seeking to know in any given situation, “What would Jesus do?” That is the only way that I can ensure that I will not regret the action that I have taken.’

Actual experiences

Perhaps as much as half of the overall time spent on the interview went towards discussing each of the possible vehicles of communication. Ngoma's impassioned accounts of the different things that he has actually experienced were captivating to say the least. His responses were as follows:

- Inward prompting – *a word that comes unexpectedly; not really looking for it when it comes*
- Word of wisdom – *happens mainly when he is preaching; totally unplanned; he finds himself deviating from the topic; he gets a sudden word with an accompanying explanation; he has to make a conscious effort to revert back to the topic; he will often discover later that someone was significantly impacted by what was said*
- Word of knowledge – *often happens in counselling sessions; a sudden knowing of information that is unrevealed or lacking; has an undeniable and significant impact when spoken; very therapeutic*
- Gift of faith – *happens at crucial stages in life; enjoys a sense of peace when important decisions are being made; after taking his first step of faith in a particular direction, he experiences a special impartation of faith*
- Gift of healing – *he experiences special insight into underlying causes of illness; he finds himself praying prayers he has never prayed before to address underlying issues; has experienced heat in his hands but only after taking action*
- Miraculous powers – *he has never experienced miraculous powers*
- Prophecy – *he has never prophesied*
- Interpretation of prophecy – *he has never felt that he has been given an interpretation of a prophecy*
- Distinguishing between spirits – *he sometimes sees fire; he often sees a python; he often feels a heavy weight or a 'pressing down' when he is close to an individual who is oppressed; his hair stands on end; he responds by praying in tongues until the bondage is broken; when addressed, oppressed*

individuals often disclose information about their bondage; he has witnessed a person tearing a tumorous growth from her body as an indication of a spiritual affliction

- *Tongues – prays in tongues at will; reverts to tongues when regular prayer seems unfruitful; he has experienced a spiritual teleportation while praying in tongues; he has found himself walking in different parts of the world; at some point during his prayer in tongues, he experiences a rapturous moment or a ‘taking away;’ it is not a simple changing of language or the making up of words*
- *Interpretation of tongues – he has never interpreted a tongue*
- *Creation – there is more to be disclosed through creation than what we are aware of*
- *The written Word (Scripture) – he experiences a ‘dropping’ or a ‘throwing’ of a word or a sentence into his spirit; he feels compelled to question or investigate a passage further; he finds a passage that is relevant to his circumstances; he discovers solutions to issues he may be facing; he sees himself in a passage, as though he were looking into a mirror*
- *Christian literature – the same as the written Word*
- *The spoken word (sermons) – he experiences new insight into or a deeper understanding of Scripture; he receives an answer to something he may have been struggling with*
- *Christian music – he experiences intense emotion and a sense of fulfilment*
- *Circumstances – sometimes brings correction; sometimes encourages; sometimes brings a warning or even direction; must be interpreted correctly*
- *Mature counsel – provides confirmation; provides answers to issues he may be facing*
- *Dreams – he sees future events revealed in dreams; they play out precisely as he dreamed them in real life; divinely inspired dreams are not incoherent – they make sense; he sees the face of the person; will simply know that there is a purpose for the dream; he remembers the dreams in detail*

- Visions – *he will often see visions that provide information about the future or manifest in the future; one may not be able to understand or relate to the vision at the time; he always sees the face of the person; the person may or may not be recognisable; the vision plays out like a film; it blocks out reality; he finds himself checking if he was asleep; he has sometimes seen visions that provide hidden information about underlying issues*
- Audible voice – *he has heard the audible voice of God many times; he finds himself looking around to see who spoke; the voice is strong and authoritative but not angry or loud; the audible voice is often directive*
- Journals – *he writes everything down that seems important while he is meditating, praying or reading Scripture; he will often remember something that was written down when it is needed*