

Perceiving God's Voice: Divine Guidance for Everyday Believers

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Abstract

Vagueness exists amongst Christians regarding what it is like to experience divine guidance practically. This problem is aggravated by conflicting perspectives on the will of God, whether or not his will is discoverable, and how Christians are to go about seeking it. This article seeks to reveal what we can reasonably expect to experience when God speaks, by considering perspectives on the will of God as well as its discoverability, and the levels of awareness and certainty of divine communication as evidenced by selected biblical characters. The article shows that the ways in which Christians experience divine direction are as unique and varied as each individual relationship with God is unique and varied. It shows, furthermore, 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. Finally, it shows that the primary way in which God communicates with us today is by means of the subtle and unobtrusive guidance and direction of our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

In Old Testament times, God's primary method of communication was by means of prophets (Num 12:6; Deut 18:14–22; 2 Chr 36:15). In this current era, God has spoken to believers by his Son (Heb 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 (Ezek 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 confirmed 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' (Phil 2:13). Today's believers are enormously privileged in that they are able to be led by the Spirit of God (Rom 8:14). We are fellow workers with God (1 Cor 3:9) and are encouraged to 'discern what is the will of God' (Rom 12:2). A problem we face is that the scriptures do not provide us with a formula to help us with this task of discernment.

2. Problem

In a survey that was conducted amongst four churches in Muldersdrift, Gauteng, South Africa, eighty-six per cent of the respondents expressed a high level of certainty that their last experience of divine guidance was of divine origin and not merely a product of their own imagination (Goosen 2013:24). It is significant to note, however, that ninety per cent of the very same respondents felt that it was possible that 'they may be oblivious to the guidance that the Holy Spirit provides' (Goosen 2013:23). Fifty-eight per cent, furthermore, opted in favour of a person having to learn to recognise the voice of God, as opposed to simply and definitely knowing the voice of God when the person hears it (Goosen

2013:26). A summary of these three findings highlights the concern: the ability for the believer to recognise the voice of the Holy Spirit is not automatic—discernment is a learned skill, and we are all at different levels of learning, no doubt making mistakes as we grow.

The situation is further aggravated by the environment in which some of us find ourselves learning to discern. Often, the terminology that Evangelicals use to articulate their Christian experience is unnuanced and unexplained and therefore potentially misleading (Cole 2007:276). It is not uncommon in modern evangelicalism to hear someone unreservedly state that they have 'heard the voice of God' or that the Lord has 'spoken' this or that. When phrases such as these 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 impacted by these assumptions.

Karkkainen (2008:14) rightly suggests that we err when we begin to base our expectations upon what we assume others to have experienced. Trying to establish precisely what others have experienced is a challenge not only because our experiences are subjective in nature, but also because our testimonies about our experiences are influenced by our biases. As Norman Geisler (1999:785) suggests, our perspectives or worldviews dictate our experience of and interpretation of reality. Understanding a person's perspective or worldview as it pertains to God and his communication with modern believers must therefore provide some insight into just what a person means when they say that God spoke. We move on, then, to a consideration of three major perspectives on this topic, which are commonly held by Christians today.

3. The Will of God and its Discoverability

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. As we embrace the biblical mandate to be co-labourers with God, who are led by the Spirit and seek to know his will, however, we begin to ask which of these ‘means’ are applicable or even helpful for us to use in the decision-making process. In his work entitled, *How then should we choose?* Douglas Huffman (2009) shows the various ways in which Christians either consciously or unconsciously tackle this problem by presenting three major schools of thought on decision-making and the will of God: the traditional or specific will view, the wisdom view and the relationship view.

3.1. Traditional or specific will view

The traditional view is the default perspective that is most commonly held by Christians today (Petty 1999:29). The 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 (Friesen 2004:35). 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). 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). 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).

3.1.1. Arguments in favour of the traditional or specific will view

Those who hold to the traditional view refer to a number of key verses to support their contention that the designer of the universe has a specific will for every person (Huffman 2009:24). It is shown that God is concerned with specifics (Matt 10:29–30). God provided specific instruction to many of the biblical characters, under both the old and new covenants: Abraham and Lot (Gen 12:1–4; 19:12–22); Elijah (1 Kgs 17:2–6); Phillip and Peter (Acts 8:26–29; 10:9–24); Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–4).

It is shown, furthermore, that God causes all of these specifics to work together, so as to ensure that everything conforms with the purpose of his will (Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11). David indicated in Psalm 139:16 that all of his days were ordained before any one of them came to be. Jeremiah was likewise set apart to be a prophet to the nations even before he was formed in the womb (Jer 1:5). It follows that this could be true of all people, for to all those who were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, Jeremiah writes, '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' (Jer 29:11).

3.1.2. Objections to the traditional or specific will view

At least three major objections have been raised against the traditional view. The first objection is that the view cannot be applied practically. When faced with a decision, Christians 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"' (Huffman 2009:115). The perspective fails us because we cannot 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' (Huffman 2009:97). The traditional perspective therefore

struggles with the risk of subjectivity. If the source of our knowledge is subjective, our conclusions will be subjective and uncertain (Huffman 2009:115). Consequently, ‘the complete clarity promised by the specific will view is not the experience of God’s people’ (Huffman 2009:89). 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.

The second objection to the traditional view is that it challenges the biblical concepts of wisdom and free will (1 Cor 7:39; 1 Thess 3:1). Those who hold to the traditional view try 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 causes the traditional view to default to the wisdom view (Huffman 2009:87). We can only differentiate between mundane choices and important choices by exercising wisdom.

The third objection to the traditional perspective is that the concept of ‘finding’ the will of God is actually a pagan notion (Waltke 1995:11). The argument is that 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 bear an unsettling resemblance to the ways in which pagans seek divine guidance.

3.2. Wisdom view

Garry Friesen (Huffman 2009:102) summarises the wisdom perspective according 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.

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). Christians facing morally neutral decisions are free and responsible to choose between two or more equally good options. 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 discount outright the authenticity and value of subjective impressions. What they suggest is that impressions are not revelatory or authoritative (Friesen 2004:92). They consider 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.

3.2.1. Arguments in favour of the wisdom view

From passages such as John 12:49–50; 15:15; 16:12–15, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:3, proponents of the wisdom perspective argue that the Bible is completely sufficient for the faith and life of every believer (Petty 1999:88). They argue that we should not expect

additional truths from the mind of God to be provided to us because the full riches of complete understanding have been provided through Christ, ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col 2:2–3).

It is further argued that there is a strong biblical emphasis upon the supremacy of wisdom (Prov 4:7). From Colossians 1:9–10 and Philippians 1:9–11, we see that a true understanding of the will of God comes through the acquisition and application of wisdom (Petty 1999:136). According to Paul, our ability to test and approve the good, pleasing and perfect will of God improves as we are transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:1–2). We can come to understand the will of God by living a careful and examined lifestyle, making every effort to be wise in every decision (Eph 5:15–17).

Those who hold to the wisdom view also argue against the belief that God communicates his will to believers, because of the understanding that God does not have a specific individual will for each and every detail of a person’s life (Huffman 2009:26). It is suggested 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’, the traditional view has added a third category of ‘individual will’, which, it is argued, lacks valid biblical and theological support (Huffman 2009:106). 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. Those who hold to the wisdom perspective argue from Deuteronomy 29:29 that this sovereign decretive plan of God is secret. We are to resign ourselves to the fact that we cannot know the secret things of God, and should focus instead on what God has revealed—the

words of his law. 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 (Petty 1999:74).

3.2.2. Objections to the wisdom view

The wisdom view is criticised for placing too much of an emphasis upon human reasoning (Blackabys 2002:5). Because of our degenerate condition, and because we are so significantly influenced by our environments, it is argued that we are incapable of enjoying pure biblical objectivity (Deere 1993:46). The scriptures teach that even the best human thinking can never measure up to the wisdom of God (Isa 55:8–9). As such, we are never to depend upon our own understanding (Prov 3:5) and should never be making decisions apart from God's involvement (Jer 17:9; Rom 3:9–18).

It is further suggested that the wisdom view is pneumatologically inadequate (Huffman 2009:164). It does not thoroughly address the fact that Christ resides within the regenerate believer by his Spirit (Gal 2:20). 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. By dismissing the feelings and impressions we experience, we turn something dynamic and growing into a sterile formula (ed. Huffman 2009:166).

Finally, the wisdom approach is accused of quenching the Spirit by turning the decision-making process into an objective intellectual exercise, leaving no room for God (Huffman 2009:170). The perspective fails by not encouraging '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 (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. Relationship view

The relationship view acknowledges much of what the other perspectives propose, with a few distinctions (Huffman 2009:174). It is argued 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’ (Huffman 2009:176). 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 in the image of God, with the capacity to choose. God will not choose for us, for this would violate the very nature of his creation (Huffman 2009:177). Given our natural limitations and a propensity towards sin, we are encouraged to make use of three resources that empower us to choose well: the scriptures, the community of faith, and the Holy Spirit. The initiative that the Holy 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 (Rom 14) and discern how general biblical principles hold sway in their particular situation. Secondly, the issue of ambiguity: we 'recognise, perhaps even with a mixture of frustration and anxiety, that we "see through a glass, darkly"' (1 Cor 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 (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' (Huffman 2009:185).

3.3.1. Support for and implications of the supremacy of relationship

An acknowledgment of the primacy of a relationship with Jesus Christ is not unique to the relationship view. Ambassadors from each of the perspectives on the will of God identify relationship as a key factor for effective discernment. A number of inferences can be drawn from their observations.

Firstly, relationship precludes the concept of discernment by means of a formula. The most important key to ensuring that we are led of God is to place our confidence in Christ (Deere 1993:182). From the account of the seven sons of Sceva, we see that a reliance upon formulas or traditions will never ensure success (Acts 3:12–13). The most significant factor in the discernment equation is Jesus (John 12:1–3). There is a risk of finding safety in theology, clinging to dogma and facts about Christ rather than enjoying a vibrant relationship with him

(Blackabys 2002:11). This is precisely the sort of preoccupation that Christ condemned in the Pharisees (John 5:39–40).

Secondly, it is within the context of relationship that God reveals his will. Only our communion with God provides the appropriate framework for communications between us and him. 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’ (Willard 1999:96). By fostering a relationship with Jesus, we learn how to be attentive to him, ‘as an immediate experience and as a dynamic of our Christian experience’ (Huffman 2009:198).

Thirdly, our ability to discern is progressive and proportionate to the depth of our relationship (Blackabys 2002:234). Abraham, whom the Bible describes as a ‘friend of God’ (Jas 2:21–23), took a lifetime to develop his faith. It took more than forty years before he ‘knew God well enough to be entrusted with His most difficult assignment (Gen 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) 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.

Fourthly, God’s communication with each of us is unique to our particularities of personality and circumstance. How God communicated with Saul (Acts 9:3–6) was necessarily different, for example, from how He communicated with Ananias (Acts 9:10–12) or even Cornelius (Acts 10:3–6). The belief that God communicates differently and personally with each and every individual is consistent

throughout the work of Dallas Willard. He explains that people need to understand that 'recognising God's voice is something they must learn to do through their own personal experience and experimentation' (Willard 1999:108).

Fifthly, relationship is reciprocal. The quality and extent of our knowledge of other people (and of God) depends more on them than on us (Packer 2004:37). Our part is to give our attention and interest, making a concerted effort to make ourselves available to seek. We should approach prayer and meditation being ever mindful of the fact that we are meeting with a real Person; it follows that we need to do more than just talk—we are to listen as well (Deere 1993:211). Even then, however, we should remember that 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' (Packer 2004:44).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we see that enjoying a relationship with God is the purpose of our existence (Packer 2004:35). From John 17:3 and 1 John 1:1–4, we see that God created us for fellowship with him (Blackabys 2002:15). The Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (Ferguson 2001:19). 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 know God (Jer 9:23–24).

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 principal 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 Cor 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. We cannot agree more with Douglas 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.

While each of these perspectives is helpful, it is probably not realistic to assume that the average Christian would hold to any one specific perspective all the time. Huffman (2009:240) rightly suggests that the three categorisations are too tidy, and that there are many who would adopt elements from a variety of perspectives. Moreover, while these perspectives certainly provide a helpful framework for decision-making, none of them truly help us to address the original problem, namely, what it is like to experience divine guidance practically. Perhaps the only way to combat wrongful assumptions about what it is like to experience the voice of God is by considering what the scriptures say about the ways in which some of the biblical characters experienced his voice.

4. Awareness and Certainty of Divine Communication

A consideration of how different biblical characters experienced the voice of God suggests that the results of the survey that was conducted in Muldersdrift were not contradictory (Goosen 2013:25). Different biblical characters showed evidence not only of varying levels of awareness of the fact that God had spoken, but also varying levels of certainty about what God had spoken. These differences might be logically organised into two broad categories: while there are ways in which God 'can and may' communicate with us, there are also ways in which God 'does and will' communicate with us.

4.1. God can and may (speak unmistakably)

As we look through scripture, we see that in some instances, God chose to speak in an extraordinary fashion.² At other times, the Scriptures simply tell us that God spoke.³ Regardless of the vehicles of communication employed, however, 'the Bible's overall testimony is that when God spoke, people knew it was God and they knew what He was saying' (Blackabys 2002:257).

With a few possible exceptions (1 Sam 3:1–10; Num 22:21–39), we do not read that God spoke and that the biblical characters were unaware that God had spoken. Neither do we read that God spoke and that the biblical characters spent time trying to discern if what they had heard was indeed the voice of God. As a general rule, we simply read that

² Genesis 15:1; 16:7; 37:5–11; Exodus 3:1–4; 4:1–8; 19:16–19; 20:18; 33:11; Numbers 22:21–35; 27:21; Deuteronomy 4:33, 36; 18:18–22; Judges 6:36–40; 1 Samuel 3:1–10; Job 40:6; Isaiah 20; Daniel 5; Matthew 2:12–13; Luke 3:22; 9:35; 24:13–35, 36–37; Acts 8:26; 9:3–6; 9:10–12; 10:9–16; 21:10–11; 22:17–21; 27:23–25.

³ Genesis 6; 12:1; Joshua 4:1; Isaiah 38:4; Jonah 1:1–3; Acts 13:2.

God spoke, that the person heard and acknowledged that God had spoken, and that the person then responded in some way or another.

An especially high level of certainty of the fact that God had spoken can be safely assumed when what was required of the hearer was unusual or extraordinary. As Jack Deere (2001:109) writes, 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.’

Abraham, for instance, would have obeyed God’s instruction to sacrifice his only son had God not intervened at the raising of the knife (Gen 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 (Ezek 4). Such enactments are not exclusive to Ezekiel, for Isaiah walked naked and barefoot through Jerusalem for three years (Isa 20:2-3). The apostle Paul did not waste any time second-guessing whom he had encountered on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–6). For the rest of his life, as he was compelled by the Spirit, he pressed on to share the gospel of Christ, despite the risk of imprisonment, hardships 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, testifies to the fact that they were absolutely certain that God had spoken.

The scriptures suggest, however, that a person can experience an especially high level of certainty of the fact that the Holy Spirit is communicating something even when he speaks subjectively or inwardly. The prophet Jeremiah, for instance, 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' (Jer 20:9). Gaebelien (1986:503) says of the prophet that he suffered a 'divine compulsion' when he wrote that 'he found out the impossibility of denying his call. He learned that it was irreversible and that God's word was irrepressible'.

We should, therefore, remain mindful of the fact that God is omnipotent and is not limited to the use of any one given method of communication. Since God is sovereign, he reserves the freedom and the ability to communicate with any individual in whatever way he may choose (Ps 115:3; 135:6; Dan 4:35; Rom 9:19–21). It is, therefore, not unreasonable for us to believe that God can and may communicate with any one of us today in a clear, unmistakable and perhaps even extraordinary fashion.

4.2. God does and will (speak subtly)

The Bible consists of sixty-six different books, composed by many different authors, over a period of around one thousand six hundred years, with a break of approximately four hundred years between the Old and New Testaments, where God was silent. Taking this into consideration, it becomes quite apparent that while God can and may speak dramatically, he has done so rather infrequently, to very few people, over a vast period of time. The scriptures themselves testify to the fact that in the days of Samuel 'the word of the Lord was rare' (1 Sam 3:1).

While dramatic forms of communication were infrequent, it does not mean that God did not continue to communicate with his people in other ways. It has always been God's intention to communicate inwardly, through the subtle and unobtrusive guidance and direction of people's hearts and minds, as alluded to in Ezekiel 36:27, which reads,

‘And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.’ We already see evidence of this sort of guidance in the Old Testament, in the account of Nehemiah, who experienced something like what might be referred to as an ‘inward prompting’. We read that he was motivated simply by that which ‘God had put within his heart to do’ (Neh 2:12; 7:5).

Later, during the apostolic era, a period in history where we can be certain of the fact that God was speaking clearly and unmistakably, there are passages that suggest that God also communicated less obviously or subtly. In these instances, the hearers appeared to show evidence of hearing the Spirit of God with a less than absolute sense of certainty. Following the council at Jerusalem, the apostles sent word to Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, providing official instructions for them on the basis that it ‘seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15:28). In Acts 16:6–7, we read of how Paul and his companions were ‘kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia’. Likewise, when they came to the border of Mysia and tried to enter Bithynia, ‘the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to’. During his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul states, ‘And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there’ (Acts 20:22).

Some might object that these verses do not explicitly show that God’s communication in these instances was any different from how he communicated with people throughout the rest of the book of Acts. However, it seems reasonable to assume that a different form of communication is precisely what Luke was implying, given that he commonly made use of far less ambiguous language in his account of how the Holy Spirit communicated with members of the early church. In Acts 8:29, for instance, he simply writes, ‘The Spirit told Philip, “Go

to that chariot and stay near it.” In Acts 10:19, as Peter was pondering the vision he had just seen, Luke tells us that ‘the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs.”’ Likewise, while the church in Antioch were worshipping and fasting, we read that ‘the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”’

It is also significant to note that the gentle voice of God can be overlooked or disregarded. Dallas Willard (1999:90) writes that it may be ‘possible for someone who regularly interacts with the voice of God not even to recognise it as something special’. The scriptures support the idea that the voice of God can either be so inconspicuous in nature, or the hearer so otherwise engaged so as to render the voice of God practically imperceptible to the hearer. A verse that perhaps speaks most pertinently to the possibility of being oblivious to the voice of God is Job 33:14, which reads, ‘For God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it.’ Not surprisingly, the results of the empirical study conducted in Muldersdrift showed that ninety per cent of the respondents considered it possible that God may have been guiding them on a regular basis but that they were simply unaware of it (Goosen 2013:23).

4.3. Further arguments in favour of subtle guidance as the preferred method of communication for modern believers

God's intention to communicate inwardly and unobtrusively with his people is also consistent with a number of biblical principles. The first is that God is Spirit, and that he longs for us to commune with him in ‘spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24). Christians are encouraged to walk by the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 25), set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Rom 8:5) and pray at all times in the Spirit (Eph 6:18). We see from 1 Corinthians 2:13–14 that the things of God are ‘Spirit-taught’ and that a

person without the Spirit cannot accept or understand the things of God ‘because they are discerned only through the Spirit’. The ways in which a spiritual God communicates with his people must, therefore, be fundamentally different from how physical people commonly communicate with each other. As Louis Berkhof (2000:66) writes, ‘By ascribing spirituality to God we also affirm that He has none of the properties belonging to matter, and that He cannot be discerned by the bodily senses.’

The second principle is that Christians are called to live lives of faith (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). Faith, by definition, is not something based upon visible or audible evidence. As Hebrews 11:1 shows us, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This concept of faith presupposes that Christians are unlikely to live their lives with an abundance of empirical evidence, visible or audible, confirming the truth of that which they believe (2 Cor 5:7). Jesus himself noted that there would be some who would believe and would be counted blessed despite their not having seen or heard anything to validate their faith in the gospel (John 20:29). That we are required to live faith-based lives is reinforced by the fact that God has already revealed himself to us, both generally (Rom 1:20) and specially (2 Tim 3:16).

The third principle is that God has designed the universe so as to ensure that people are able to function as free agents. While God is sovereign, and while his decretive purposes will stand, we are afforded the freedom to make real choices with real consequences (Deut 30:19). As Sproul (2009:44) explains, we willingly submit to the process of sanctification, which ‘involves a radical reprogramming of the inner self’. God does not manipulate or wrestle anybody into a decision or a course of action. Instead, as the author of Philippians writes, ‘It is God

who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil His good purpose' (Phil 2:13). Of this verse, Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1999:364) explain that 'man is, in different senses, entirely active, and entirely passive: *God producing all, and we acting all*. What He produced is our own acts. It is not that God does some, and we the rest. God does all and we do all.' As such, in a very real sense, we are not merely servants on standby for instruction, but collaborators with God (1 Cor 3:9), people who are promised guidance and instruction but still reserve the freedom to choose their own path in life (Ps 32:8; John 16:13).

5. Conclusion

Unlike Old Testament believers, who needed to look to the prophets to hear what God had to say, today's believers are privileged in that they are able to be personally led by the Spirit of God and discern his will. However, the scriptures do not provide us with a formula to help us with this task of discernment. We do not begin the journey of learning to discern with a definition of what it is like to experience the voice of God practically. We make wrongful assumptions, based upon careless terminology others use to describe their experiences. We assume, furthermore, that God speaking to us must be something like our speaking with another person.

Each of the perspectives on the will of God and its discoverability advocated today offers some helpful guidelines on how the Christian can go about the task of discernment. It is advisable, however, to heed some of the objections that have been raised against any one preferred perspective. One might be best served adopting positive elements from each of the perspectives, while being careful to commit to the common principles held by each. 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. They all agree, furthermore, that there cannot be discernment apart from relationship: having a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ is of the 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.

We often try to establish an expectation of what the voice of God is like from the biased testimonies of the subjective experiences of other believers. It is far more preferable, however, to base our expectations upon the ways in which some of the biblical characters seemed to have experienced the voice of God. In doing so, we see that dramatic forms of communication were very rare – the exception, rather than the norm. We see, furthermore, that it has always been God’s intention to place his Spirit within us and for his Spirit to work quietly and inconspicuously, causing our hearts and minds to align with his character, and ultimately directing us to make free choices that are consistent with his purposes. We see, finally, that even those who had ears finely attuned to the voice of the Spirit, those who penned the very words of God, were not always absolutely certain about what God was saying. We should, therefore, not place our hope in a methodology of discernment, but rather place our trust in God, the One who promises that those who earnestly seek him will find him (Prov 8:17; Jer 29:13).

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