

"THE SPIRIT SPEAKS EXPRESSLY"

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Oral Roberts said God told him he would "call me home" if he did not raise eight million dollars by the end of March, 1987.¹ Pat Robertson has been critical of this "fund raising tactic," evidently doubting that God really told Oral that.² Pat, on the other hand, says he is in the presidential race "in response to the clear and distinct prompting of the Lord's Spirit."³ This, however, is in spite of Pat's statement in an earlier book that God told him "to stay out of politics." A later edition of the same book omits the record of that advice.⁴

In addition to questions about fiscal integrity and politics, this raises some theological questions: To whom does God or the Spirit speak directly today? If one hears a voice or feels a strong leading, how may he or she know whether it is from God? If someone else says God has told them something, how can another determine whether their claim is true?

As members of this Society, we have all confessed, "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety is the word of God written . . ." Peter can speak of "the scripture . . . which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David" (Acts 1:16). He tells us that "prophecy of scripture" came as "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (I Pet. 1:20-21). The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews cites the Holy Spirit's "witness to us" by quoting scripture (Heb. 10:15-17, citing Jer. 31:33-34).

Evangelicals would all agree that when we read, understand and correctly apply scripture, we have an authentic word from God through the Holy Spirit. That God speaks today, and that the Holy Spirit clearly and unmistakably leads in other, quite direct ways is also believed by all charismatics (at least, I know of no exception, and an exception would appear to be an anomaly) and by many, perhaps most, non-charismatic evangelicals.

Anecdotes based on testimonies are one form of evidence frequently adduced. Preachers tell of strong leadings to leave one place of work and go to another, with success following when they heed, failure when they disobey. There is, of course, no way to test what would have occurred had they followed the other course. Surely some preachers have done what they were led to do and it still did not turn out so well! Why are those stories never told?

Many stories are so unusual that, if they were told by a Mormon testifying to an "inner witness" that the book of Mormon is the word of God, or told by a modern channeler from the new age movement, we would discount them as coincidence embellished by overenthusiastic exaggeration.

David Wilkerson's autobiographical story of a country preacher who felt strongly led to go to New York City to help some teenaged gangsters is a testimony to a step by step leading of the Spirit that goes beyond remarkable to miraculous. In one instance he tells of driving in New York

City in totally unfamiliar territory, having no idea of even what area to go to, following only "inner impulses," and finding himself parked directly in front of the house of the very person he was looking for.⁵

D. H. Battley quotes Bishop F. A. Cockin as saying that the truly great book on the Holy Spirit, which was still crying out to be written, might be "a poem or a novel rather than a theological treatise." Battley asks in a footnote, "Was David Wilkerson's The Cross and the Switchblade that book?"⁶ My special interest in this topic began with the reading of Wilkerson's book when it was first published. Two questions suggested themselves. Believing differently than Wilkerson on several significant matters, I wondered why God, if he told him to go to these specific people and led him to where they were, did not do a better job of telling him what to say! Secondly, believing myself to be a faithful Christian, indwelt by the Spirit of God, frequently praying for wisdom as directed by the Bible (James 1:5-6), I wondered why I received no such guidance. I have had many inner impulses, strong urges and inclinations of varying intensity, but they lacked any clear impression of being divine in origin, and none were remarkable for their insight or outcome.

These questions have occurred as well to those who advocate the direct leading of the Spirit. Roy Zuck asks, "If two people profess to be taught by the Spirit and yet hold differing views on some scriptural passage or issue,

which view is valid?"⁷ Dallas Willard's book is subtitled, "Developing a Conversational Relationship With God." He tells of a conversation with his wife's grandmother, "Mema." After services one Sunday, they were speaking of their pastor's vision for an increased ministry for their church. He had testified that God had spoken to him about the things which should be done. "Mema," he said,

seemed deep in thought as we continued to chatter along. Finally she quietly said, "I wonder why God never speaks to me like that."

A simple comment, coming like a bolt out of the blue from the heart of this woman of unshakable faith and complete devotion, forever changed my attitude toward glib talk about God speaking to us or about divine guidance. . . . Such talk leaves many sincere Christians "on the outside looking in," or forces them to play at a game which they don't really understand and with which they feel extremely uncomfortable.⁸

Michael Green believes that "by a deep inner peace about" a matter, we can be "virtually sure of the will of God," but he urges us to "avoid excessive recourse to that overworked claim, 'The Lord told me to do such and such.'"⁹

The remainder of this paper will attempt two things:

- (1) Pursue the question, if direct divine guidance is truly divine, why is it not also infallible and authoritative?
- (2) Examine some of the important Biblical texts relating to Holy Spirit leading and the will of God.

If God Speaks Directly To Us, Do We Have God's Word?

Most of us who believe the Bible is inerrant and authoritative argue from the prior claim that the Bible is God's word. It is the nature of God to be true; so his word must be true (John 17:17). If God is God, he must be obeyed;

so his word is authoritative (II Thess. 3:14).

While some charismatics may have "revelations" they treat as virtually equivalent to scripture, most proponents of direct Holy Spirit communication make a clear distinction between scripture and today's leading as to certainty and authority. Willard warns,

We cannot invoke (God's guidance) to prove that we are theologically correct. . . .How many times have we heard someone invoke God's support for their cause with a "God says" or a "God told me"--subtly sometimes, sometimes blatantly invoking the voice of God to prove they are right!¹⁰

Zuck typically believes the Holy Spirit guides the believer in understanding and interpreting the Bible but says this does not mean the interpretations one is guided to are infallible. "Inerrancy and hence infallibility are characteristics of the Bible's original manuscripts, but not of the Bible's interpreters."¹¹ Indeed! But inerrancy and authority are in the manuscripts because of the work of the Holy Spirit in the authors. If the Holy Spirit is really guiding the interpreter, why is what he is guided to understand by the Holy Spirit not as valid as that which the same Holy Spirit guided the others to write?

James Lee argues against any "mysterious and unfathomable work" of the Spirit and against making learning result from miraculous "zaps of the Holy Spirit," stressing that such makes learning activities "unexplainable," "unfathomable" and "unverifiable."¹² Zuck agrees with Lee, but says, "He then goes too far in ruling out the Holy

Spirit's work altogether."¹³

Thus there is posited a direct guidance of the Spirit, sufficiently explained and hedged so that every Christian is not deemed to be as inspired as the apostles; so we are made to inquire whether in fact the result actually reflects direct divine activity.

On the other hand, many of those who speak most often and confidently of the Spirit's leading do so precisely to appeal to its authority. When Earl Paulk debated Hal Lindsay on "dominion theology," Paulk reasoned that thousands of people understood through the eyes of the Holy Spirit that what he was saying was in line with the Scriptures. Lindsay replied that many, also Spirit filled, were saying Paulk was a heretic.¹⁴

When a pastor tells his congregation that God has spoken to him regarding the pastor's plans for the church, what is he doing if not invoking God's authority for those plans? Will not all of those members who believe in direct Holy Spirit guidance accept the pastor's declaration, except for those who believe some other plan is better? Might not they claim God has spoken to them regarding their plan? How may they or others determine which plan, if either, has God's approval?

A preacher tells his audience, "The Lord has laid a message on my heart for you this morning," and proceeds to speak so incoherently that he cannot be understood and with such lack of intelligible content that no scriptural message

is discernible. Another preacher makes no claim for direct divine communication, but with the humility of a forgiven sinner, the motivation of an earnest seeker of God's will for himself and his people through scripture, and the insight of one who loves and moves among his people, he brings a message he deems appropriate for the time and occasion. Which is really Spirit led?

This exaggerated contrast is not to suggest that those who claim direct divine guidance are all like the former, nor that those who do not are like the latter. It is designed to press the inquiry: If the Lord directly suggests a message to us, but that does not ensure that the message is correct as well as needed (How can it be needed, if it is not correct?), then what have we said when we make such a claim? What would direct guidance from the Spirit bring to a preacher except a certainty and authority beyond what the truly Biblical, Spirit led preacher would want to claim?

Billy Graham writes in a quite restrained manner on the Holy Spirit's direct guidance, warning against being led by feelings. However, in discussing how we may "quench the Spirit" (I Thess. 5:19), he says,

This happens many times when there is a fresh, new, or different movement of the Spirit of God--perhaps not using the old traditional methods in proclamation or service. For example, when some Christians sometimes seek to block what God may be doing in a new way.¹⁵

No issue is more volatile today than the sweeping changes being made in the order and mood of the services of worship in our congregations. Some are sure that replacing

William Cowper with Amy Grant, and silent amens with enthusiastic whistling and applause, is indeed a fresh new movement of God's Spirit. Others are equally sure that it is from the devil. Is Dr. Graham saying, "Anything new is from God's Spirit"? Surely not! Must we not examine each proposal on its merits, first considering what Scripture teaches and then considering the needs of the church and of the community she is trying to reach? Does the claim of either side to "feeling led of the Spirit" add anything of value to the discussion? If not, is anything of value being claimed? If so, how does one determine who really has the leadership of God?

We are warned, "The Holy Spirit's inward guidance usually comes as an urge, or pressure, but we should ever guard against confusing it with mere human impression."¹⁶ However, no workable criteria for avoiding such confusion is ever given.

The same question was raised between Moses and the Egyptian sorcerers (Ex. 7) and between Paul and the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11-20). There God himself showed unmistakably to whom he had spoken. Though some today are disposed to "put out fleeces," most are concerned to emphasize the difference between guidance and inspiration, and do not expect such signs as God wrought for Moses and Paul.

It is generally acknowledged that the intensity of the urge is not an assurance that the urge is from God, since

wrongful urges can also be intense. Proponents of direct divine leading tell us not to be led by feelings, but they speak of "deep impressions,"¹⁷ "inward urges"¹⁸ and "a mind at peace".¹⁹ How, one wonders, does one distinguish between an urge, an impression and a feeling?

We are warned that these urges must be measured against scripture, common sense and the counsel of spiritual teachers, and rejected if they are fanciful or opposed to clear Biblical teaching.²⁰ But if an impression which would otherwise be deemed to be the voice of God can give counsel contrary to the Bible, what assurance is there that a similar impression is God's word when it speaks on some matter not directly touched by the Bible?

We are told of the difference between the "common sense approach of the natural man" and yielding to the guidance of the Spirit within,²¹ but what about a third alternative: the common sense approach of a child of God who has immersed his or her mind in scripture because of an intense desire to know and do the will of God?

Ultimately, it comes to this:

A person who has walked with God and sought His leading over a period of time will develop the ability to discern the Spirit's leading more clearly.²²

The first time you receive guidance you will know the difference. You can mistake rhinestones for diamonds, but you can never mistake a diamond for a rhinestone.²³

How, I pray, do you distinguish day from night? How do you distinguish light from darkness; or the light of a star, or a glimmering taper, from the light of the noonday sun? Is there not an inherent, obvious, essential difference between the one and the other? And

do you not perceive that difference, provided your senses are rightly disposed? In like manner, there is an inherent, essential difference between spiritual light and spiritual darkness; and between the light wherewith the Sun of righthousness shines upon our heart, and that glimmering light which arises only from "sparks of our own kindling": and this difference also is immediately and directly perceived if our spiritual senses are rightly disposed.

To require a more minute and philosophical account of the manner whereby we distinguish these, and of the criteria, or intrinsic marks, whereby we know the voice of God, is to make a demand which can never be answered: no, not by one who has the deepest knowledge of God.²⁴

So, in effect, we are told, "If it happens, you'll just know!" One may wonder, what is the difference between that and this:

This afternoon, I have a message from the Water Tower Monster. The Water Tower Monster is an awesome specter who lives beneath the water tower just outside of town beside Highway 59. His message is this: He wants everyone in town to believe in him. He says that if there are any unbelieving residents remaining at the end of one year, he will destroy the whole town. When you believe in him, you will experience an unmistakable shiver in your liver. The stronger your faith becomes, the more he will reinforce your faith through communication with your inner being. Are there any questions?

After a few moments of restless silence, one student decided to humor me. "I live pretty close to that water tower. Why haven't I ever seen this monster?"

"The Water Tower Monster is only visible to believers," I replied.

Another spoke up. "Then you have personally seen the monster with your own eyes?"

"Oh, yes," I replied. "Not, however, with my physical eyes. I see him with the eyes of my heart."

"The eyes of your heart?"

"Right. As I grow closer to the Water Tower Monster, the liver shivers become stronger and his presence is more clearly confirmed within."

.....
"But how do you know the difference between a genuine 'liver shiver' and liver disease?"

"When you experience the real thing, I explained, "there is no doubt about it. The inner message is as distinct as if the Water Tower Monster were speaking audibly."²⁵

There is more, but the point is made. An inner urge, no different in any definable way from an urge anyone else, whether religious or non-religious, might have, does not prove, either to others or to oneself, that God is speaking. Our faith and our knowledge of God's will stand on more concrete and objective ground than that.

What Does the Bible Say?

Advocates of direct Holy Spirit guidance appeal to the scriptures for support of their view. Campus Crusade International's response to Garry Friesen's Decision Making and the Will of God used as examples, God leading Abraham's servant to a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24),²⁶ God calling Jonah to preach in Ninevah (Jonah 1:1-2),²⁷ and the Spirit directing Philip to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-29) and Paul not to go into Bythinia (Acts 16:6-7).²⁸ Jesus' promise of the Paraclete to "guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13), and Paul's assurances in Romans, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God" (Rom. 8:14), and "It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our Spirit that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16), are the classic texts on the subject.

Allotted time and space do not allow close examination of all pertinent texts. Consider, please, two types of texts:

- (1) Those specifically addressed to the prophets and apostles and related to their special call and inspiration.
- (2) Those that speak of leading and guidance, but do not

specify personal or inward guidance.

The promise of Jesus to send the Paraclete is one of the texts most frequently cited as a promise of direct guidance.

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come (John 16:12-14).

Jesus was speaking here to his apostles, as the context, going all the way back to the Passover supper in the upper room, shows. That fact alone does not mean we are not included in the promise, for Jesus said many things to the apostles for them to pass on to us. However, all evangelicals recognize that God did grant certain special powers to the apostles and did use them to reveal truth to the rest of us in a special way. The text and its context, not the preconceptions we bring to the text, should determine whether this is a special promise to the apostles or a more general promise to all disciples.

A parallel promise is given in the same larger context. "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). This promise, on its face, only applies to those who meet the requirements of apostleship by seeing Jesus in the flesh (Acts 1:21-22). Who today has heard things from Jesus as they did which must be brought to remembrance by the Spirit?

More importantly, however, is the scope of the promise here given: "He will guide you into all truth." It is an

accepted fact that the apostles did receive as special revelation through the Spirit all the truth necessary for our salvation. Since the apostles were used in that special way, why should it be thought strange that a special promise relating to that mission would be given? What believer today would claim to be guided into all truth, or its negative corollary, to be kept from all error, as the apostles were in their special mission?

Rene Pache believes that the Holy Spirit guides the believer today as he did Philip and Paul in their travels, but he recognizes that Jesus in John 16 is speaking of how the Spirit will guide the apostles to reveal the gospel to us through their writings.²⁹

In Ephesians 3, Paul rejoices at being chosen by grace to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He speaks of

how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit (Eph. 3:3-5).

The chain of revelation is here clear: The message is a mystery; that is, it can only be known by revelation from God. God's Spirit has revealed it to the apostles and prophets. They, in turn, have written it, as Paul has done in this specific instance to the Ephesians. When we read, we can understand it.

Jesus' words in John 14-16 certainly contain the promise to the apostles of their part in this chain. What suggestion is there in the text or context that they also promise direct

revelation or guidance to believers perpetually?

"Are there passages that teach personal, subjective, inner work and guidance by God the Holy Spirit in the New Testament?" One paper raises this question and answers, "Yes," citing the passages in John just referred to and the verses in Paul that speak of being led by the Spirit.³⁰

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship by which we cry, "Abba! Father!" It is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom. 8:14-16).

The paper comments,

This Spirit to spirit communication is clearly interpersonal: an impression, a conviction, a feeling, a subjective experience of some kind. Otherwise all we would need is the gospel, the truth of God, the word of God.³¹

How is this "clearly" an impression or feeling? Are those the only ways the Spirit can witness? The inspired writer of Hebrews says, "The Holy Spirit also bears witness to us by saying . . ." and then he quotes scripture (Heb. 10:15-17). There we are clearly told that scripture is a witness of the Spirit to us. Where are we clearly told that our feelings or impressions are His witness?

The Spirit has revealed in scripture how to know one is a child of God. When we see in scripture how to be saved, we have the witness of the Spirit. When our spirit responds that we have met the conditions of salvation, then the Holy Spirit's witness combines with our spirit's witness that we are God's children. The text says, "The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit," not to our spirit. This scriptural

witness of the Spirit grounds our assurance of salvation on the firm foundation of God's promises, not on our fickle, changing feelings.

We must be led of the Spirit, but if one reads that as "inwardly led" or "personally led," he must bring those qualifiers as assumptions to the text; he does not get them from the text.

Certainly our relationship with the Holy Spirit (as well as with the Father and the Son) is interpersonal; he is a person and we are persons. He is, however, a Spirit person, not a flesh and blood person; our relationship therefore is not sensory, not physically seen or felt. That does not make it impersonal. Scripture is a loving letter from a living God, and by reading it one may personally commune with the Divine person whose word it is.

The Bible is not dead. The word of God is living and active (Heb. 4:12). The gospel is the power of God to salvation (Rom. 1:16). The truth of God is his means to sanctify (John 17:17). The implanted word is able to save the soul (James 1:21). "Truly, truly I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). It is no less the word of the Son, no less the witness of the Spirit, because it is written instead of spoken, or read instead of felt. The difference is that the written word is much more certainly His word.

Conclusion

One is not a Deist just because he doubts that inner urges and impressions are God's speaking or the Spirit's nudging. The Spirit of God dwells in his child as the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it. God rules in the affairs of men and nations. A sparrow cannot fall without his notice, nor an empire rise without his blessing. He works all things to his children's good. He opens and closes doors. We cannot say we will do thus and so; we must know that, only if God wills, we shall live and do this or that.

This paper does not maintain that God has performed his last act of providence. It maintains that he has given his last revelation, said his last word in his Son, Jesus Christ (Heb. 2:1-2). It is not piety that seeks to sacrifice Christ again on the altar each worship service. He has finished his work on Calvary. His sacrifice there was once for all (Heb 10:12-14). Neither do we need to seek further revelation, whether from modern prophets or from inner urges. God's word is sufficient to bring the man of God to completeness and to equip him for every good work (II Tim. 3:16-17). The faith has been delivered once for all (Jude 3).

Endnotes

- ¹Time (July 13, 1987) 55
- ²Christianity Today (August 7, 1987) 34.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Widely reported on television news.
- ⁵David Wilkerson, The Cross and the Switchblade (Pyramid Publications, 1963) 31-32.
- ⁶F. A. Cockin, God in Action--A Study in the Holy Spirit (Penguin Books, 1961) quoted in D. H. Battley, "The Holy Spirit: Energy of God for Mission" in International Review of Mission LXXV 298 (April, 1988) 152.
- ⁷Roy B Zuck, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in Hermeneutics" in Bib. Sac. 141 (April-June, 1984) 121.
- ⁸Dallas Willard, In Search of Guidance (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984) 12.
- ⁹Michael Green, I Believe in the Holy Spirit (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) 94-95.
- ¹⁰Willard, op. cit. 80-81.
- ¹¹Zuck, op. cit. 122.
- ¹²James Michael Lee, "The Authentic Source of Religious Instruction," in Norma H. Thompson, ed., Religious Education and Theology (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1982) 194-97.
- ¹³Zuck, op. cit. 128.
- ¹⁴National and International Religion Report I.12 (June 15, 1987) 3.
- ¹⁵Billy Graham, The Holy Spirit (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978) 130.
- ¹⁶Linda Raney Wright et al., Decision Making and Your Walk With God (San Bernadino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1985) 58.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 41.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 61.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Bill Bright, The Paul Brown Letter (San Bernadino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1963) 2.

²²Wright, op. cit. 43.

²³Adela Rogers St. John, Guideposts (December, 1968) 8

²⁴John Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit" in Sermons on Several Occasions (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1836) I. 91-92.

²⁵Garry Friesen, Decision Making and the Will of God (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980) 127-28.

²⁶Wright, op. cit. 29-30.

²⁷Ibid., p. 39.

²⁸Ibid., p. 40.

²⁹Rene Pache, The Person and Work of The Holy Spirit (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954) 150.

³⁰Wright, op. cit. 15-16.

³¹Ibid.