



Hearing the Voice of God

Part 3: Shhh! I'm Trying To Hear God's Voice

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Imagine a familiar Bible story told in modern day evangelical verbiage: One day Moses was out tending his sheep in the wilderness, minding his own business when he began to sense the Lord trying to tell him something. Moses prayed about it saying, "Lord I feel like you want to tell me something. Help me to listen to your still small voice Lord. . . . Lord, I sense that You don't want me to tend sheep anymore? Is that true?"

Silence.

"Is that a 'yes', Lord?"

Silence.

"Lord, I sense that you are telling me that You don't want me to tend sheep anymore. I feel like You want me to do something different. If that is true, then can you send me a sign, a confirming sign? Please show me something clear."

The following day while Moses was tending his sheep one of the sheep fell off a cliff and died. "That is the sign!" Moses thought. So he prayed again, "Lord. I have this feeling that you want me to do something for You instead of tending sheep. If that is true, would you please confirm it in some way?"

That night while Moses was asleep, he had a dream in which that same lamb was alive and bit Moses. After he woke up, Moses realized that this must be God's confirmation.

Later that week, Moses began to daydream about his days in Egypt. He remembered the time in Pharaoh's palace and his time spent in the Egyptian schools. Suddenly he realized that God put thoughts of Egypt in his mind and must be telling Moses to return to Egypt.

The more Moses thought about it and prayed about it, the more he felt a peace about returning to Egypt. So Moses prayed, "Lord, if you want me to go to Egypt, if these thoughts of going back are from you then give me a peace about it."

After three days Moses was out in the desert tending sheep again when a caravan of Egyptian merchants came through. Moses discovered that that they were on their way **back** to Egypt. Surely this was **the** sign. How much clearer could God make it? Moses went home that night and told his father-in-law, Jethro, that he was no longer going to tend sheep. He explained that he was returning to Egypt. Moses recounted the signs that God had shown him and explained that God had spoken to him and told him to return to Egypt. This was the impression he had from the Lord. God had given him a peace about it and he felt a check in his spirit concerning staying in the desert.

Jethro confirmed that God had been speaking to his heart about Moses and that after the sheep died, for some reason Jethro began to fear that Moses' days of tending sheep were nearing an end. They concluded that this was indeed the will of God and that this was what God had been trying to reveal to them all along. This must be the confirmation of what God had been quietly revealing to them individually.

Huh?

Does that sound right to you? Is that how **Exodus 3** reads? Is that how Moses was told by God to leave Midian and return to Egypt as the great deliverer of God's people? Likely, you will laugh at such a scenario? And you should! For 1800 years of church history, such an approach to divine direction would have been rejected as superstitious mystical nonsense.

Yet today, countless Christians think and live as if that is exactly how God reveals His will to His children. They would quickly retort: "Well, that's not how God led Moses then, but that is how God leads me now." Really?

In all of the cases of direct divine guidance given in Scripture, can you name a single instance when such a

scenario was ever played out? Moses, Elijah, David, Solomon, Paul, Samson, Samuel, or Peter? Further, are we ever told to read “signs” and seek “confirmations” or to pray about something and “get a peace about it” or to make decisions based on a “check in the spirit” or a “feeling”?

We are *never* told in Scripture to seek divine guidance by *any* of these means. Nor do we see any examples of this method in the lives of the people of God. The modern notion of receiving direct divine guidance through visions, dreams, impressions, confirmations, and signs lacks both precept and precedent in Scripture.

Back to Sola Scriptura

In the last chapter,¹ we looked at the claims that the Bible makes for itself. We looked at the foundational doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture in the life of the child of God. We should now be able to recognize that any teaching that directs God’s people away from Scripture and toward a subjective means for hearing God speak, should be a cause for great concern. For, whenever there are two competing sources for divine guidance, whether it is the teaching magisterial of the Church (as in Roman Catholicism), a modern-day prophet (as with Mary Baker Eddy of Seventh Day Adventism or Joseph Smith of the Mormons), or a private word from God spoken to the heart and mind and confirmed through signs, the Bible will inevitably get the short shrift. It will always take the back seat. I have yet to see it otherwise.

This is why the historic orthodox Christian Church has always affirmed the doctrine of Sola Scriptura - Scripture Alone! God speaks in His word!

Let us now turn our attention to that Word. What does the Bible say concerning supernatural divine guidance? We do not want to simply assert that the Bible does not tell us to look elsewhere for guidance. Instead we want to answer two questions. First, “What does Scripture teach about **how** God gives guidance?” Second, “Do I have reason to believe that the type of supernatural divine guidance seen in Scripture is to be the norm for every believer today?”

Divine Guidance in Acts

Let’s focus for just a moment on the New Testament examples of God speaking to people and giving divine guidance. After all, if we are to find a pattern for divine guidance for believers in the church age, we would expect to find it modeled in the New Testament. The most fertile

soil for us to examine would be the book of Acts.

The book of Acts covers a period of 30 years in which we find a high concentration of supernatural guidance and events. If we are to find examples of God leading through promptings, nudgings, feelings, or signs, surely we should find it in Acts. If we are going to build a case for Christians receiving directions and personal assignments from God through subjective personal revelations, we should be able to make that case from the book of Acts. What do we find?

You can read through the whole book for yourself and take note of all the instances where people received special directives. You will find 14 such instances:²

1. An angel rescues the apostles from prison and tells them to preach the Gospel (**5:19-20**).
2. Philip is sent to the Gaza road by an angel (**8:26**).
3. Philip is directed to the Ethiopian eunuch by the Spirit (**8:29**).
4. While traveling on the Damascus road, Saul hears the audible voice of Jesus directing him to Damascus (**9:4-6**).
5. Ananias has a vision in which the Lord instructs him to visit Saul (**9:10-16**).
6. Cornelius is instructed by an angel in a vision to send for Peter (**10:3-6**).
7. Peter is instructed by the Spirit to visit Cornelius (**10:19-20**).
8. Peter is ordered by an angel to follow him out of prison (**12:7-8**).
9. Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the Holy Spirit on their first missionary journey (**13:2**).
10. The Holy Spirit forbids Paul to speak the word in Asia (**16:6-7**).
11. Paul is directed through a vision to Macedonia (**16:9-10**).
12. Jesus appears to Paul in a vision and tells him to preach the Gospel in Corinth (**18:9-10**).
13. Paul is told through prophecy not to enter Jerusalem (**21:4**).

¹ You can read the previous articles in this series posted on our website at www.kootenaichurch.org.

² See also http://www.str.org/free/solid_ground/SG9901.htm

14. Jesus tells Paul in a vision to leave Jerusalem (22:18, 21).³

Fourteen times! Wow! At first blush one might be inclined to think that direct divine guidance was being given to God's people at every turn. It does seem like a lot until we look a little closer. For instance, keep in mind that these 14 examples took place over a period of some thirty years. That is one every other year (averaged). That still might seem like a lot until we consider the aggressive spiritual nature of the book of Acts. Think of it from a different perspective. From the time of Pentecost, during the lifetime of the Apostles, we have only fourteen instances of direct divine guidance. Only fourteen!

When we go a little further and break this list down a bit we can make some significant observations which allow us to see what is going on. In the majority of these instances (five), the direction comes through a vision. In three instances, the message is received from an angel. Four separate times it is the Spirit that speaks. One is a prophecy and one is the voice of Jesus.⁴

There are five other instances where revelations were given, but they were predictive in nature, not directives. These other five instances are not the kind of guidance we are addressing in this series. In those instances, no assignments were given.

Further, we can observe that six of the fourteen instances had to do with the worldwide expansion of the gospel message from Jews to Gentiles. This is significant. Two of those six had to do with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus and his commission as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Two of the six had to do with the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch (by which the Gospel went to Africa) and two had to do with the conversion of Cornelius by Peter which initiated the mission of the church to Gentiles. Two of the fourteen instances of divine direction pertained to prison breaks and two pertained to Paul's stay in Jerusalem. The remaining four had to do with Paul's missionary journeys.

It is also important to notice **who** were the ones receiving such direct, supernatural, personalized divine guidance. In the above list twelve of the fourteen examples centered on the Apostles - mostly Peter and Paul. Only two of the instances pertained to someone who was not an

Apostle, namely Philip. It is important to point out that Philip was **very closely** associated with the Apostles in Jerusalem and one of only a few non-Apostles mentioned in Acts who also performed miraculous signs (Acts 8:6). Philip was also a key player in the worldwide expansion of the Gospel message recorded by Luke in Acts.

I believe we can reasonably conclude from the examples in the book of Acts that the direct divine guidance recorded in the New Testament after Pentecost was connected to the Apostles and their ministry for the purpose of directing the rapid worldwide growth of the Church through the preaching of the Gospel.

I am at a loss to explain why anyone would think that each and every believer should expect such personal guidance for their run-of-the-mill, everyday decisions. Why would anyone read through the book of Acts and conclude that God has promised to give such guidance to answer questions such as "Who should I marry?," "Which job should I take?," or "Should I go on vacation this week or next?"

Where Are The Similarities?

When we compare the purpose, scope, and type of guidance offered in Acts with what many Christians think they are receiving today, we are truly hard pressed to see any genuine similarities. In fact, we notice that certain features of the modern "felt led" theology of divine guidance are glaringly absent, not only from the book of Acts, but the rest of the New Testament as well.

First, missing from the biblical record is any mention of God giving guidance, direction, or speaking to people through "nudgings," "promptings," "signs," or some "inner sensing." ***It is not there!*** I don't know how else to say it. Fourteen examples of divine guidance in the book of Acts and yet we read nothing of "promptings," "confirmations," or internal subjective nudgings of the Spirit. We don't read of a "check in the spirit" - a favorite acid test for those who think they are being personally led by God- or the Apostles "getting a peace about it" or "waiting for a confirmation" to the guidance. There is not a single record of God giving a direction or knowledge of His will through a subjective means. ***It is not there!***

Second, there is no indication anywhere in Acts that Christians, including the Apostles, ever "waited" on God for direction. We don't read of them praying and waiting to hear an answer from God. We don't see them waiting to be told what to do. We don't read of them asking God for direction. We don't read of them seeking to discern or hear

³ For these five instances see Acts 11:27-30, 20:23, 21:11, 23:11, and 27:22-26.

⁴ See also http://www.str.org/free/solid_ground/SG9901.htm This summary of divine guidance in Scripture is taken from *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Greg Koukl from Stand to Reason Ministries (www.str.org).

the voice of God through some quiet “listening prayer.” They never plead with God to show them His will, speak to their heart, or give them a sign. ***It is not there!***

Third, we never hear the Apostles use language like, “I felt led to . . .,” “I believe the Lord is directing me to . . .,” “I am sensing that the Lord wants me to . . .” or “God gave me a sign and I believe He wants me to . . .” We never read of an Apostle saying, “I have prayed about this decision and I have a peace about it.” We don’t see this taught or modeled anywhere in Acts nor anywhere else in the New Testament. ***It is not there!***

You might say, “But Jim! You are arguing from silence. Just because it is not there doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.” I understand the weaknesses of an argument from silence, but I am not basing my argument on silence. It is the “felt led theology” camp which bases their argument on silence. When they press ahead with a model for hearing the voice of God in spite of the total absence of such precept or precedent in Scripture, they are essentially saying, “Yeah, we don’t see it taught or modeled in the New Testament, but this is how I sense that God leads me.”

I am not arguing from a silence, but suggesting that if the New Testament does not teach it, *neither should we*. The *total absence* of biblical teaching and example should prevent us from *assuming* that it *did* happen and from teaching that this is a biblical practice. The burden of proof rests on the person who says that God speaks to us through some inner prompting, some still small voice. If the case cannot be made from the book of Acts or direct teaching on the issue in the epistles, why should I think that such a notion has any validity at all?

If it is true that God does indeed communicate to His people through these subjective means (impressions, signs, promptings, inner thoughts, still small voice, etc.) then there is certainly nothing more pivotal, more vital, and more essential to the well-being, obedience, and sanctification of the believer than being able to hear and discern the voice of God. There would certainly be few, if any disciplines in all of the Christian life more important than that of hearing God’s directions. This would be an essential element for church leadership, counseling, preaching, shepherding and the day-to-day decision-making of millions of people in countless situations, **yet** the Epistles are *silent* about this method of hearing God speak, and we have *no* examples of such subjective leadings in the New Testament. We don’t find it taught anywhere.

Either the modern notion of hearing the voice of God through private revelations is complete nonsense, or God

has been utterly negligent in not revealing to us the method by which we can discern and hear His voice. How could God fail to give to His people clear instruction and examples of such an essential discipline?

The New Testament epistles are completely silent when it comes to this supposed doctrine of listening for the voice of God apart from Scripture. There is no instruction to believers on how to receive subjective private revelations from God. Yet Christians today speak as if God is giving them direction on all sorts of day by day decisions. They use phrases like, “The Lord revealed that I was to go meet with so and so,” “The Lord told me to talk to you,” or even “The Lord told me what name I was to give our newborn baby.”

If you tell a gathering of Christians, “We feel that the Lord is telling us . . .” or “The Lord just told me I was supposed to go . . .” nobody will bat an eye. It is assumed as a cardinal doctrine of the faith that if we have a desire, or a thought, or an inclination, it must be from God. So Christians assign the authority of divine fiat to their stray thoughts! Most think nothing of it.

But try telling people that an angel appeared to you while you were cooking dinner and gave you instructions and your reaction will be quite different. Tell people that Christ Himself appeared to you and gave you some directives and suddenly Christians will step back from you a couple of paces.⁵ Tell someone that you had a vision in which the risen Christ gave you instructions and you are liable to land yourself in an institution. Ironically, **these** are the means of divine guidance we see modeled in the book of Acts and not the subjective impressions, promptings, and inner voices we hear so much of in modern Evangelicalism.

Why should I believe that if God is going to give me personal direction (apart from Scripture) that it should come in any form other than the forms we see in the Bible. There is abundant Biblical precedent for these supernatural communications from God and no precedents for nudgings, promptings, or the sensing of God’s will through my feelings or thoughts.

Does this mean then, that I should be expecting some supernatural communication from God in a vision, appearance of Christ or an angel? You may think that that is where this is leading, but we should ask the question another way, namely, “Do the Scriptures tell you that you should expect such things?” Where are you ever told in

⁵ That is, of course, unless you are swimming in Word Faith or radical Charismatic circles, in which case such stories are not only believed but expected as the norm.

Scripture that such communications are the lot of every believer? Where are you ever told in Scripture that you ought to be anticipating such supernatural divine manifestations?

Is Scripture not enough for you? Are you somehow so important in the worldwide scheme of the gospel message that **you** have to be individually directed by God? What makes you think you are on par with Peter, Paul, Philip or Moses? Is it not enough that God has given you the inspired, pure, holy, and all-sufficient Word?

What Does it Look Like?

All this raises the obvious question, “When God gave divine directives in Scripture, what did that divine direction look like?” The divine directives in the New Testament which came after Pentecost had four distinct qualities.⁶

First, when God gave direct divine guidance in Scripture it was **rare**. Even in the book of Acts, we do not get the impression that these things were commonplace. We only have fourteen instances from the time of Pentecost. Only one of Paul’s three missionary journeys was directly commissioned by God. Only one!

We have no justification for taking a handful of instances and making them the model. We cannot take irregular and exceptional events and expect them to describe the norm. They are by definition both irregular and exceptional. Acts doesn’t indicate that these events were commonplace or that such divine guidance was the lot of every believer all of the time.

Second, when God gives direct divine guidance in Scripture it was an **intrusion**. It was not expected or sought after. You can read the instances in the book of Acts yourself and you will not find the recipients of such guidance *seeking* the guidance. God surprised them with it. They were going about their regular daily activities when suddenly the Lord interrupts them.

Third, when God gives direct divine guidance in Scripture it was **supernatural**. Visions, visitations, voices, prophecies, angels were the vehicles, not nudgings, promptings, thoughts, or coincidental signs.

Fourth, when God gives direct divine guidance in Scripture it was **clear**. It didn’t need to be interpreted. God makes it clear because *He expects it to be obeyed*. He does not need to speak to us through signs and symbols, or whispers and stray thoughts that we are supposed to

decipher in order to know the will of God. When God speaks, He speaks with clarity in order that the recipient will obey. There was never any doubt! They didn’t have to wonder if this was God or Satan speaking, the Spirit or the flesh, the Lord or the burrito they ate for lunch.

They didn’t need to seek counsel from others, confirmations, or interpretations. It was clear. They didn’t need to try to tune in to God, rid themselves of distractions, remove barriers to hearing God speak or try to quiet their hearts to hear God. They knew that the revelation came from God and it was clear.

Paul didn’t get up from the road outside of Damascus and say, “You know, I sense that the Lord wants me to be an Apostle and stop persecuting Christians. I think that that is what the Lord is telling me, but I’m going to have to pray about it and see if I get a peace about that decision. Perhaps I can get a confirmation when I get to Damascus.” It was clear.

God in a Box

Does this view of divine guidance put God in a box? That is the objection that some will certainly raise.

I am not putting God in a box. I am not saying what God can and **cannot** do. God is free to act in any way He chooses. He can communicate to his servants by any means He wants. The question at hand is not what God can or cannot do, **but what does Scripture teach about how God communicates to us?**

God **can** communicate to me through a leprechaun in my refrigerator if He wants, but I have no biblical basis to expect that He **will** communicate to me through a leprechaun in my fridge. God **could** make the snowman in my yard speak to me, but I have no biblical reason to expect that He will. God **could** deliver messages to me through a voice from my neighbor’s horse, but that doesn’t mean that I should be spending time hanging around the horse.⁷ Nor can I teach God’s people that such a thing happens. We must base our belief and practice on what Scripture teaches, **not on what might be possible for a sovereign God to do.**

God has told us how He operates and how He communicates to us. He hasn’t mentioned anything about nudgings, promptings, or mystical leadings. He hasn’t left us any example in Scripture of such a thing. To point that out is not to put God in a box. It is to teach what God has revealed about these matters.

⁶ This summary of divine guidance in Scripture is taken from *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Greg Koukl from Stand to Reason Ministries (www.str.org).

⁷ After all, God did that very thing through a donkey in Numbers 22, yet I don’t hear anyone promoting this model for hearing the voice of God!

God puts Himself in a box. He has revealed His ways to us in order that we might be able to discern what is His doing and what is not. He has outlined the means through which He works. I am not limiting God in any way to simply observe the ways in which God has communicated and what God has revealed about how He communicates to us.

God in a box? On the contrary, the person who puts God in a box is the person who thinks that God cannot be “real” or “personal” to them unless they are receiving private, direct, and subjective messages from Him through the Spirit.

Can God communicate to us through means apart from Scripture? Properly speaking, yes, He could. The question is, “Does He?” Do I have legitimate biblical warrant for believing that He does? Do I see this practice either taught or modeled in the New Testament? The answer is no. God **can** do anything He wants, but we are not free to teach or practice anything we want. We are only free to teach that which is revealed in Scripture.

If this practice of hearing the voice of God in our thoughts and feelings is not taught in Scripture or modeled in Scripture then we have no justification for believing that it is indeed a legitimate biblical practice. Further, we have no justification for believing that we can expect such personalized continual revelations.

Without wax -

