

To hear God's voice and to do His will

The subjectivity of inner impression as a form of guidances

Some people react to inner impressions because they are convinced that they are hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit. The terminology of many Christians confirms this. How often do we not hear "God told me" and "God said to me" in sermons and general conversations. In obedience to this "voice" some prophesy, others have sold houses, some have made career changes, others have given away large sums of money, some have got married and some have even got divorced. To interpret inner impressions as the voice of the Holy Spirit presents us with several problems that need to be seriously considered. So for instance, the success rate of taking inner impressions as a form of guidance, is to shocking low to believe that this is the normal way in which God speaks to His people.

The problems concerning inner impressions

1. Inner impressions are subjective

It is quite normal for a person to have inner impressions; however, it is important to appreciate that many factors can play a role in their formation. The human spirit is often the source, but the danger exists that deceiving spirits can be involved. Fatigue, illness, drugs, experiences, or even the weather, can all play a role in influencing the type of impressions that are formed in people's minds. Furthermore, there is the important role that books, advertisements and the media play in terms of creating inner impressions. From all this, it is clear that if inner impressions are to be taken as a form of guidance, the voice of the Holy Spirit has to be discerned. This is why so many sincere Christians, so often, find it difficult, stressful and confusing to be sure about what the will of God is when it comes to decision-making.

2. Inner impressions are not authoritative

Teachers of the "inner voice" method recognise that inner impressions are not authoritative in that they insist that they have to be confirmed by other sources; a scripture, confirmation of the body (other brothers and sisters), and also by circumstances. It is believed that when these things are "in line" and confirm each other, God's voice has been heard. When we analyse each one of these factors that is supposed to confirm the impression, we see that each one in turn is also subjective.

(i) Scriptures

Dates when God has "spoken" in confirmation are usually written next to positive verses that promise health, wealth and happiness. Usually negative verses expressing hellfire and brimstone are ignored when confirmations are sought. Furthermore, subjective influence of a person's theological background has to be taken into account; the denomination he belongs to, the Bible school he might have come from and the influence of spiritual leaders

that he looks up to. All these things influence the way in which a person interprets scriptures and the subjective way in which he applies them.

Often the historical and prophetic context of Israel and the Old Testament are also not taken into consideration. A good example of this is **2 Chron.7:14** that is often wrongly applied to South Africa during prayer meetings for change in our country. “*My people*” whose country will be restored one day is the covenant nation of Israel.

So often proper distinction is not made between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive in Scripture. A good example of this is **Acts 2:2-3** which is often quoted to prove that a person must speak in tongues when he or she is filled with the Holy Spirit. Although in the same contexts **Acts 2:2-3** is never used to insist that when a person is filled with the Holy Spirit he or she must also experience the sound of a rushing wind and flames of fire! One part of a descriptive piece of Scripture is used as being prescriptive and the other part is ignored.

(ii) Confirmation of the Body

Very few people have the objectivity to honestly evaluate the opinion or criticism of those who differ from them. The ones who come up with the confirmations and whose opinions are accepted, usually belong to the same church and have the same theological mind-set. A wise man once said: “If you have money for only one newspaper, make sure you buy the opposition’s.”

(iii) Circumstances

In the Bible we have good examples of people who were misled and who made wrong deductions by looking at their circumstances. One of the best cases is the warning that was written to the church in Laodicea (**Rev.3:17-18**). They were looking at their material abundance and thought that they were rich and did not need anything. They did not realise that their material wealth was no sign of their spiritual state; in fact they were “*wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*” Christians dare not make any positive or negative spiritual deductions by looking at what they possess or do not possess materially.

In another instance the inhabitants of the island, Malta, initially thought that the gods were against Paul because after the disaster of the shipwreck, he was bitten by a viper. When they saw him shaking the snake off into the fire and nothing happening to him, they quickly changed their opinion and said he was a god (**Acts 28**). In both cases they came to wrong conclusions by looking at circumstances.

What have we learnt? If the elements of confirmation are all uncertain, the “voice” will also be subjective and uncertain. Instead of simplifying things, the subjective factors of confirmation just tend to complicate things!

3. Does God have a mature will for mature Christians and an immature will for immature Christians?

Immature Christians tend to make more unwise decisions than mature ones. If communicating His will through inner impressions was God's normal way of speaking to His children, then wisdom and maturity would not play such an important role in decision-making in every day life. God's will is perfect, even if it is revealed to a child. Maturity, not the ability to receive esoteric revelation, is one of the most important qualities required for elders in the church as set out in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 2.

4. Everyday decisions versus major ones

Everyday hundreds of ordinary decisions are made by using our common sense. For example, we see that the tank needle shows empty and we stop for fuel. Where do we draw the line between minor and major decisions in terms of the way we deal with them? At which stage does our own responsibility to make wise decisions stop and at which stage do we wait for a voice to guide us? Again, uncertainty!

5. Biblical examples of guidance relative to inner impressions

Inner impressions cannot be compared and placed on the same level as most of the examples of guidance given in Scripture. Most of them were supernatural revelations through angelic appearances, an audible voice, visions and physical miracles. While inner impressions are real and a common experience, Scripture does not state that such impressions are authoritative.

6. Peace as a guide in decision-making

Usually we are told that when we experience peace in decision-making it means that we are doing the will of God. The verse from Colossians 3:15 is usually given as a basis for this belief. We must point out that the context of the discussion of Colossians chapter three is not guidance through inner impressions, but a moral lifestyle. The peace that is mentioned here has to do with relationships with one another as members of the body of Christ. Is the presence of peace always an indication of the Holy Spirit's guidance, or can it be explained by other factors? Sometimes believers can experience peace in what they are doing because of wrong teaching, immaturity and ignorance. Feelings alone are no indication of God's approval or disapproval. It is unlikely that Paul had "inner peace" in all the adversity that he suffered: stonings, beatings, shipwrecks, jail sentences, drifting on the open sea, hunger... (2 Corinthians 11), yet he never doubted that he was doing the will of God.

Inner feelings should not be taken as reliable evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit in a person; what should be looked at is whether there is a change of disposition and conduct.

What about throwing out a fleece for getting to know God's will?

Because God is who He is, He can do anything He wants to. He can also honour a sincere person's faith by responding in confirmation to a "fleece" that was thrown out. But by studying the part in Scripture where this method of guidance is taken from, we quickly see

that we have no scriptural basis for applying this method as a form of getting to know the will of God.

In **Judges 6:12** we read that the angel appeared unto Gideon and made God's will known to him by speaking to him. Gideon then asked for a sign as confirmation. Fire flared from the rock and consumed the meat and the bread that Gideon had placed on it. Gideon was still not satisfied and put out a fleece and asked God to allow the fleece to become wet, whilst the ground stayed dry. It happened the way he wanted. Still he was in doubt. He then asked God to let the dew fall on the ground and let the fleece stay dry. Again it happened as he asked.

The point we want to make is this – Gideon did not throw out a fleece in order to get to know the will of God; that was given to him by the word of God that came to him through the angel. His asking for a sign was because of his lack of faith in the word of God that had already made God's will known to him!

Why does the fleece method sometimes produce good results?

Sometimes when a fleece is thrown out it contains a principle of wisdom. For example: I say to myself that if I get fifty thousand rand for my car I will know that it is God's will that I sell it. (The car is only worth thirty thousand!)

What about the drawing of lots?

Some are of the opinion that because the apostles drew lots to decide who to choose in the place of Judas (Acts 1:21-26), that it is a legitimate way of finding God's will. The answer is again found by looking at the context. It was decided that a requirement was that the person who was to be chosen had to be one of them who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry up to the time of his ascension. Two men who met these conditions were proposed. It seems that they would have been satisfied with either one. Here we have a case of equal options. They recognised the sovereign will of God by first praying and then drawing lots. In order to get to the short list they had followed the way of wisdom. Only in cases where you have equal options and where you do not want to show bias, would it be wise to draw lots.

Conclusion

If inner impressions come directly from God and make His will known to us, why do we still need confirmation? The fact that confirmations are sought proves the fickleness and inconsistency of impressions. The rate of success of this method is too low and inconsistent to be acceptable as the way in which God guides His people in a regular way. Bear in mind that we usually hear only of the success stories, but what about all the failures that we never hear about?

Another thing to consider is that even unbelievers sometimes get "hunches" that lead to success. When we are honest with ourselves we must admit that usually most of our "hunches" lead to nothing. Inner impressions must at least have more uniform results before they can be accepted as the voice of God.

What is the alternative? Instead of asking how to hear the voice of God, shouldn't we rather be asking how we can make wise decisions?

The Way of Wisdom

"Eat honey, my son, for it is good; honey from the comb is sweet to your taste. Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future for you, and your hope will not be cut off" (Prov.24:13-14).

"Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise...Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is" (Eph.5:15-17).

"...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" (Rom.12:2).

We cannot speak about the will of God without distinguishing between His sovereign and His moral will.

1. The Sovereign Will of God

There is not much that we can say about God's sovereign will. God can do what He wants, to whom He wants, when He wants. Except for the things that He has chosen to make known in His written word, the Bible, His sovereign will is an unknown mystery. From the Word we do know the following:

(a) According to God's standard His sovereign will is good for you. In the letter to the Romans we read that in all things God works for the good of those that love Him (Rom.8:28).

(b) God is very powerful and what He wants to let happen, will happen.

(c) The whole spectrum of the supernatural falls under the control of God's sovereign will. Here we think of things like the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians12:11), angels, miracles, healings, and one aspect that we want to especially emphasise for the sake of our discussion on hearing the voice of God, special guidance. God can and does still speak to people in special ways: it can be through an audible voice, through dreams and visions, even through a donkey if He chooses. The Bible is full of these supernatural manifestations. However, you can believe that He is able to, and you may even ask Him to speak to you in this way, but there is nothing that you can do to make it happen. It is God's sovereign department. If it happens, it happens, if it does not, it does not. The responsibility to make it happen does not rest on the believer, but on his Master. Since when does a servant make up his own orders? If the servant does not hear anything, it is because his master has not spoken. The responsibility is not on the believer to conjure something up that must be taken as the voice of God!

One thing that we can say about this extra-Biblical manifestation of the supernatural voice of God: it is very scarce. (Note that here we are not referring to the voice of God coming to us every time we read the Bible.)

The Way of Wisdom also considers the moral will of God.

2. The Moral Will of God

The moral will of God is fully revealed to us in the Bible. All Scripture is inspired by God and is given for *“teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”* (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

One of the pieces of our spiritual armour with which we can defend ourselves against the deception of deceiving spirits is the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (**Eph.6:10-18**). Jesus also tells us that man cannot live by bread alone, but needs to live spiritually from every word that comes from the mouth of God (**Matt.4:4**). It is unwise to listen to any voice, inner impressions included, before getting to know what the written voice of God, the Bible, has to say. Paul took the revelation of God in written form so seriously that he said that, concerning spiritual matters, one should not go beyond what is written (**1 Cor.4:6**).

Here I am reminded of a leader in a well-known church who asked me why I did not agree with certain manifestations that were taking place in his meetings. When I quoted that one should not go beyond what is written, he argued that modern fridges, microwave ovens and TV's are also not mentioned in the Bible and did that mean that Christians are not allowed to use them. He was serious! My reply was that I found it difficult to reason with somebody who did not know the difference between spiritual doctrine and modern day household appliances!

Jesus reiterated the importance of following His Word when He said to those who were listening to him that if they would put His words into practice they would be like a wise man who built his house on a rock. We need not wonder or try to listen to our own imaginations to find out what His words were – they were recorded for us in Scripture by inspired men who heard Him speaking. God does not treat His children like puppets or robots. The fact that each believer will have to appear before the judgement seat of Christ one day to give an account for what he did with his life, proves that we have the responsibility of ordering our lives according to God's moral will (**Rom.14:12, Gal.6:5, 1 Cor.3:10-15**). The moral will of God acts like the beacons that life savers put up on the beach to indicate the area where it is safe to swim. They do not mind what you do in the water; you may splash or swim as you please, as long as you stay between the beacons. Perched on their high seats, they keep watch, and as soon as somebody goes out of the safe area, they blow their whistles and wildly wave their arms to order the person back. In a similar way God has given us freedom to do as we like, as long as we stay between the beacons of His moral will.

Here it is important to refer back to a fact previously mentioned; special guidance. If you have received special guidance to do something, then you must do it. If you do not have such direct instructions from God, then you have the freedom to live out God's moral will in the way that you choose.

For example, if you are sure you have special guidance to go and do missionary work in Russia, then you better get there. However, if you have received no supernatural guidance from God about a specific place, it does not mean that God has nothing for you to do. His moral will is revealed to you in a Scripture such as Matthew 28:19: *“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”* If God has not clearly told you to go to a specific place, He does not mind where you want to go and stay – Matatiele, Pretoria or Cape Town, as long as you obey His moral will while you are there, which, among many things, include the making of disciples and teaching them His Word.

A man came to see me once because He thought it was God’s will for him and his family to go to a faraway place to do missionary work. I asked him whether he had special guidance. He asked me: “What’s that?” I did not think that he had it! When God speaks to you directly in terms of special guidance, it will be so dramatic that you will know it!

In **Acts 16** we find an example of special guidance. Paul and his companions were trying to do what they knew to be God’s will for them, to go and preach the Gospel. Several times they missed it in terms of the place that they wanted to go to. God then stepped in and gave them special guidance through a vision of a man calling from Macedonia, to which they immediately responded. It was not something they thought out, imagined or even expected – it was totally supernatural and a sovereign act of God.

In summary, the following principles should be considered: The specific moral commands and general principles given in the Bible are not good suggestions; they are given to be obeyed! Where non-moral issues are concerned and where God has not revealed His specific will in terms of special guidance, the believer is free to make his own choices based on wise decision-making which will glorify God and lead to spiritual enrichment. Although we are given the freedom to make our own plans, we should submit all our planning to the sovereign will of God. He has the right to interfere as it pleases Him.

This principle of having the freedom to make one’s own plans, but submitting them to the sovereign will of God, is confirmed in **James 4:13-17**. *“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Instead you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”* It is not against our own planning that we are warned, but against not acknowledging the sovereign right that God has to step in and change our plans if He wants to.

By doing His moral will God wants us to bring glory to His Name in everything that we do. (*“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God”* **1 Cor.10:31**).

His moral will is the expression of His character. Through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He has given us the ability to live out His moral will, which is to be righteous, pure, full of love, forgiving, compassionate, patient, submissive, obedient, kind and generous.

What role does conscience play?

From Scripture it seems that God has implanted in man a basic sense or consciousness of the reality of His existence. This basic conscience that even primitive people have (though often suppressed), should teach them the difference between right and wrong (**Rom.1:18-**

32). Unfortunately, the sinful nature of man comes and distorts this basic conscience with ungodly cultural traditions. So for example, some primitive races see nothing wrong in creeping up on their enemy, killing him and hanging his scalp in a prominent place in his dwelling. Many scalps are esteemed as items of great honour! A person's conscience can become calloused by wrong upbringing, and in the case of believers, wrong teaching. Paul clearly warns that in later times some believers will abandon the faith and follow teachings of persons who have been influenced by demons and "*whose consciences have become seared...*" (**1 Tim.4:1-2**). The Word of God encourages a person to allow his thinking to be influenced by godly teachings so that he will be able to discern what is right and wrong. Paul put it like this: "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is...*" (**Rom.12:2**). Like any other form of guidance, you also have to submit your conscience to the Word of God to determine if it is leading you in the right direction.

What about Rom. 8:14?

The latter part of this verse that says: "*...because those who are led by the Spirit of God are the Sons of God*" is usually quoted as proof by those who interpret inner impressions as the voice of the Holy Spirit.

When we look at the immediate context of this verse we see that general moral living is being discussed – the putting to death of the deeds of our sinful nature – it does not deal with daily decision-making in non-moral issues. What is being discussed is righteous living. There is no indication of a certain method being discussed that will lead to finding an individual will. Some refer to the "voice" in Isaiah 30:21 as proof of the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the context of the Old Testament, it may be a reference to the voice of the prophets, sent by God to lead the people. However, there is no indication that the method of guidance which is mentioned in this verse is a reference to inward impressions

God-given resources that can help us make wise, God-honouring decisions

- 1.** Ask God for wisdom to make wise decisions. **James 1:5** says that if any man lacks wisdom he should ask God for it, Who will give generously.
- 2.** Common sense is a valuable gift of grace that develops as the mind is renewed by the Word of God. (**Rom.12:1, 2**) It is just a pity that common sense has become so uncommon! Common sense is so important that in **Tit. 2:2** it is mentioned as a qualification for being an elder in the church. The Greek word, *sophron*, translated in the KJV as "*sober minded*", actually means "*to be wise*" or "*being of sound mind*" ([Vine's Expository Dictionary](#)). The only time that common sense should be ignored is when it contradicts God's moral will.
- 3.** Spiritual Counsellors (Prov.11:14). Note, however, that counsellors may contradict each other in the advice that they give, and therefore what they advise must also be evaluated.

4. Personal Desires. Desires are not authoritative and must, therefore, also be evaluated. When options are equal, choose the one that will be the most enjoyable!

5. Circumstances. Circumstances have to be considered because they provide us with valuable information in the making of wise decisions.

6. Inner Impressions. Inner impressions may be considered, but they are not to be considered as authoritative. Impressions that conform to God's moral will and that can pass the test of wisdom, may be followed.

Conclusion

The fact that the early apostles must have followed the way of wisdom is demonstrated by looking at some of the terminology that they use in the Bible. They were open to divine intervention through special guidance, but it seemed that they understood the principle of freedom to choose their own course of action in pursuing Godly goals. Consider the following examples of the way in which they spoke: "...we thought it best..." (**1 Thess.3:1-2**), "...I thought it necessary..." (**Phill.2:25-26**), "...it seemed good..." (**Acts 15:28-29**). Many other examples can be quoted. We may also consider the way in which the apostles appointed deacons in **Acts 6:2-6**. After making wise proposals, the Bible says that it pleased the whole group.

We are often asked: "But don't you consider your inner impressions, look at circumstances or listen to what the other members of the Body have to say?" Our answer is: "Of course we do, but not to guide us in an authoritative way, but to help us make wise decisions." There is a big difference between allowing these things to lead you authoritatively and using them to assist you in making wise decisions.

So what is important is that in following the way of wisdom, the responsibility does not rest on the believer to stir up special supernatural revelation or guidance. The goal is not to struggle to find a "perfect will", but to make wise decisions that will glorify God.

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