



Ambassador Basic Curriculum

Decision Making and the Will of God **Questions & Appendices**

Questions

Question 1: Are you saying the Holy Spirit doesn't speak to us at all?

That depends on what you mean by the word "speak." The Scripture identifies different ways the Holy Spirit subjectively works in our hearts.

The Spirit teaches, convicts, comforts, and leads us out of sin. The Spirit renews us, giving us godly desires. I also believe God even gives us ideas we have the freedom to act on.

Since He imparts spiritual gifts I don't deny the subjective element that's involved in their exercise. My challenge here, though, is not about people who have certain spiritual gifts,¹ but about how Christians are to understand decision-making, regardless of their gifts.

These are all ways one could say that God speaks to us. He "speaks" to us when He comforts us, teaches us, convicts us, or leads us out of sin. There is an ineffable sense in which God communicates with us to give us comfort, wisdom, insight, and understanding as we pursue ministry and Christian living. But I prefer the words "teach," "convict," and "comfort" because these are the biblical terms and are less confusing.

Note that none of these involve propositional revelation, which is what we normally mean by the word "speaking." I wouldn't say my spouse "speaks" to me when she hugs me, though I may infer from this that she loves me. When my wife speaks, there is propositional content. When she hugs, there is comfort. The two are entirely different.

There's nothing mysterious about this. Revelation for the Christian comes through objective sources like the Bible or prophetic utterance: God speaking. God can also be personally experienced in very profound, intimate, and emotionally powerful ways, but that's not speaking. No information is communicated directly.

We would do well, I think, to keep these concepts distinct, as the Scripture does. However, it's clear to me that Christians usually use the phrase "the Spirit speaks to us" in ways the Bible just doesn't support. I do not think the Bible teaches anything like what some have called a "conversational relationship" with God.

Regarding this concept I have three comments. First, the Bible simply doesn't teach we must "hear" God before we can make decisions. Where are we presented with the idea that we must listen for a privatized message from God? Where does the Scripture assert

¹Since I am not a cessationist regarding spiritual gifts, I acknowledge there may be unique ways God "speaks" to those with special supernatural gifts. Such gifts by their very nature are unique in kind, function, and distribution. These lay outside of our analysis and are not subject to the biblical concerns I've mentioned. The Bible says very little (virtually nothing) about the nature of their operation.

this as a teaching? It's just not there.² (For my response to Jesus' comments "My sheep hear my voice," see question 3.)

Second, there is no advantage to actively listening for God's voice. If God wants to say something He will. No one has to be quiet and "tuned in" so he doesn't miss the opportunity. I know of no place in Scripture where God has attempted to speak and He wasn't heard because people weren't listening.

Third, not only is it not necessary, it's dangerous. When we give attention to our inner life, we're going to "hear" something, even if it's only the flow of our own thoughts and desires. Here's the danger: This teaching allows us to assign divine authority to our own thoughts. There is no biblical justification for this and perils abound.

Instead, we should seek God's "voice" in the only place Scripture tells us to: the Word. The Bible is the only form of God's voice we are ever explicitly told to heed and understand. Spiritual maturity is not the ability to discern God's voice. It's the ability to understanding and apply Scripture in every circumstance.

Question 2: What about when I pray for help and I immediately get an insight that bears fruit? I also know of some musicians who truly believe God gives them songs. Aren't those examples of God speaking?

I'm thoroughly convinced that God is a very present help in time of trouble, confusion, and distress, not merely as a source of comfort, but also as a source of insight, creativity, or sudden awareness to answers to hard questions or difficult problems. I've often prayed when stymied by a computer malfunction, or even when I've lost my keys (and found them soon after my prayer). I'm convinced that God was involved in all of that. I have a friend who tells of how God helped him fix his plumbing in response to a prayer! And of course there are countless times I've relied on the help of the Holy Spirit when trying to find clear, memorable ways of communicating difficult concepts in teaching. Sometimes God responds to such prayers subtly, and sometimes quite dramatically. Clearly, God's Spirit is at work at times like this.

Yet there is a very important difference between, on the one hand, receiving revelation ("God said to me...") and, on the other hand, receiving creative "inspiration," gaining helpful insight in unraveling a problem, or experiencing the outworking of a spiritual gift. Special revelation is extremely rare and carries with it a very unique authority. By contrast, creative inspiration or insight is quite common, especially for the Christian actively depending on God and leaning on Him for help (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Since I think God is directly involved in both, but through an entirely different means, I think it best that different language be used to describe each. There's a difference between saying "God gave me this song," and "My gift or my inspiration or my ability come from the Lord." If God really gave the song, presumably the words are His and not ours, and we are not free to change them through editing or rewrites, partly because they're God's words and not ours, and partly because the concept of improving God's song is a contradiction in terms. (Also, as some have pointed out, when someone claims "God gave me this song" one rightfully expects better music than the song often delivers.)

²When the text says, "Listen to the voice of the Lord," it usually is using the word "listen" synonymous with the word "obey," much like a mother would use it when she says, "Listen to me when I tell you to do something."

However, if we see God's role as the spiritual force behind our gifts and accomplishments, we can pray for help, wisdom, inspiration, and creative solutions to vexing problems expecting God to answer without at the same time being committed to saying "God gave me the words for this play," or "God told me what I had to do to fix my computer," or car or bathroom fixture, as the case may be.

Question 3: Then what did Jesus mean when He said, "My sheep hear my voice and follow me"?

John records four mentions by Jesus of His sheep hearing or knowing His voice (10:3, 4, 16, 27). Verse six is key to understanding this passage. Here John explicitly states that Jesus' remarks about hearing His voice are a figure of speech.

Jesus begins by talking about shepherds and sheep (10:1-6). Unlike the thief and robber, the legitimate shepherd enters by the door and calls His own by name. They then follow Him as He leads them out. Jesus' point is lost on those listening, though, so He explains the details of the illustration.

He is the door of the sheep (v. 7). Those who pass through Him find salvation and abundant life (v. 9-10). He is also the good shepherd who, unlike the hireling, lays down His life freely for His sheep (v. 11-13, 15, 17-18). The shepherd and the sheep know each other (v. 14). When His other sheep hear His voice, they also become part of His flock (v. 16).

Once again, the Jews fail to completely understand (v. 19-21). What is the problem? Jesus' answer is crystal clear: "You do not believe because you are not of My sheep" (v. 26).

Two key questions need to be answered from the text of John 10. First, what does it mean to hear Jesus' voice? Second, what causes us to hear His voice?

It's critical to remember John's clarification: Jesus was using a figure of speech. The word "voice" can't mean voice. A thing is never a metaphor of itself. It's a picture of something else. Jesus must be referring, in a figure, to something else that the phrase "hear my voice" represents. What is it?

In context, Jesus' meaning is unmistakable. He says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me and I give eternal life to them" (v. 27-28). Note the sequence: They hear His voice. They follow Him. Then He gives them eternal life. Hearing Jesus' voice is a figure of speech for the inner working of the Holy Spirit that leads to our salvation. It results in salvation, it's not the result of salvation.

Remember, the Jews have no trouble actually hearing Jesus. They know what He's saying. They hear His instructions just fine. Their problem is responding. The voice being referred to here is not the whispers of private direction given by God, but the effective call of the Holy Spirit bringing us to Christ.

Why don't the Jews "hear" in the sense that Jesus means, that is, respond and believe? Jesus tells us plainly. They don't "hear" because God is not "speaking" to them. They are not among the sheep the Father has given to the Son. That is Jesus' unambiguous teaching.

Now the second question: What enables us to hear? Jesus says the Father is the cause, sovereignly enabling those sheep He's given to Jesus to hear and respond. This

“hearing” is not for believers after salvation, but for non-believers prior to salvation. It’s not dependent on the quality of our relationship with God, but on the Father’s choice.

The current emphasis on hearing the voice of God is completely foreign to the text of John 10. To Jesus, hearing God is not a skill to be developed. It is not an advanced discipline opening the lines to personalized assignments from the Father. It’s not a fruit of a deepening love relationship with God. It’s a figure of speech.

Hearing Jesus’ voice is not getting a special assignment, it’s getting saved. It’s the result of the Father drawing the non-believer into Jesus’ arms.

Question 4: Jesus said He did the things the Father told Him to do. If Jesus, our model, received direct guidance, shouldn’t we expect the same?

The principal question is this: Is Jesus our model in everything? The correct answer is no because Jesus was not only the perfect man and humble servant, but also the Messiah and incarnate Son of God. We imitate His human perfections, but not His prerogatives of divinity or messianic office.

What about in the case mentioned? I think it’s helpful to quote the entire passage exactly. Here is the complete citation from John 5:17-23:

(17) But He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.”

(18) For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

(19) Jesus therefore answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. (20) For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel. (21) For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. (22) For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, (23) in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.

Note first of all verse 18. The Jews, understanding Jesus’ comments to be a clear claim to deity, seek to kill Him. The word “therefore” in verse 19 indicates that what follows is meant to buttress this singular claim.

Note also the three phrases in parallel construction: “For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things...”, “For just as the Father raises the dead...”, and “For not even the Father judges anyone....”

These verses are a complete unit. If the Father showing Jesus “all things that He Himself is doing” is an example for us to model, then we’re also to give life to whom we wish, judge the world on the Father’s behalf, and demand that all people honor us as they honor the Father.

Obviously, that is not Jesus' teaching here. In context, these verses have to do with the divinity of Christ. He is unique as the incarnate Son of God and therefore has unique obligations, unique abilities, and a unique relationship with the Father.

Verses 26-27 clear up any question on this score: "For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man." The phrase "Son of Man" is a Messianic title from Daniel 7:13 that Jesus used often. As Messiah, Jesus has a singular role.

Because Jesus is unique, He never directs His disciples to follow His example in John 5:17-23. No subsequent writers—Peter, John, Paul, Luke—ever mention it. We are not to imitate those things pertaining to Jesus' divinity or His Messianic office.

This same principle applies to Jesus' comments in John 8:26, 28: "I have many things to speak and to judge concerning you, but He who sent Me is true; and the things which I heard from Him, these I speak to the world....When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me."

Remember, John 8 is one of the great passages on the deity of Christ. The Jews ask, "Who are you?" (v. 25). Jesus eventually answers: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I Am" (v. 56). Jesus is arguing that He is utterly unique. He is from above, not below, and not of this world (v. 23). He is the only Savior (v. 24). He lives in perfect obedience to the Father (v. 29). He is a free man—a son—not a slave (v. 35). He has proceeded forth from the Father (v. 42). He is the great "I AM" (v. 58).

Note also that Jesus said the Jews were also "hearing" from their Father, Satan: "I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father" (v. 38). Are we to understand that the Jews were having conversations with Satan getting direct commands from him? Or did Jesus mean rather that they were doing his deeds (see v. 39)?

One final point. Even Jesus did not expect it was enough merely to claim to speak for God. Instead, He appealed to corroborating witnesses: John the Baptist, prophecy, miracles (e.g., John 10:25, 37-38; 14:10-11).

Question 5: What about in the Old Testament? It seemed like God was always intervening with special direction.

Yes, we do see what appears to be a lot of special intervention during certain periods of Israel's history. The question is this: How are we to apply those passages today? Here are a couple of observations.

First, even in the lives of the patriarchs, this kind of guidance is exceptional. We see scattered occurrences separated by years of apparent silence. It does not appear this was their normal way of making decisions.

Second, as time goes on and Scripture is given, we see fewer interventions. The written Word gives instruction governing decisions. When those instructions are not enough, God intervenes in a clear, supernatural way to give specialized direction, just as in the New Testament examples.

Third, Kings made most of their decisions based on the Law, not on special divine directives. This was one of the reasons the Law had been given, to help people make

decisions and enable kings to govern in an orderly fashion. Most of the exceptional cases of guidance were for decisions regarding battle plans, though even here it was not always the case.

Fourth, in 1 Samuel 10:7 Saul receives the Holy Spirit. Samuel then tells him to do what the occasion requires and God would be with him. The same was true for Solomon. Though at times it seemed he had direct access to God, he still asked for wisdom in order that he might lead the people (2 Chronicles 1:10).

Finally, it's true that the Jews needed a pillar of fire, etc., to assure them of God's presence. They also used the Urim and Thummim or cast lots to make decisions. Is this an appropriate method to make decisions in the New Testament economy? I don't think so. That's why we don't see examples of this in the church age (the casting of lots in Acts 1 was before Pentecost, and questionable even then), and they are never mentioned in the Epistles.

Question 6: Didn't God say, "Be still and know that I am God"?

Yes, it's from Psalm 46:10: "Cease striving and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth." This verse says nothing about hearing from God, though. As the NASB translation makes clear, "be still" doesn't mean "be quiet and listen to the inner voice of God," but rather to stop striving and rest in God's sovereignty. There are many places where the phrase "know that I am God" appears in the Hebrew Scriptures to communicate the sovereign power of the Almighty. We are to meditate on His attributes, not listen for His voice. That's the sense in this passage, too.

Question 7: What does the phrase "Wait on the Lord" mean?

"Waiting on the Lord" does not mean we delay all action unless and until we've "heard from God." Instead, it refers to an attitude of trust & reliance on God during trying and difficult times (see Psalm 27:14). It can also refer to resting during the waiting period during which God sovereignly delays answering our prayer.

Question 8: Aren't you putting God in a box?

This is a very important question and needs to be carefully considered.

Please hear me clearly. I'm not saying what God can or can't do. He can intervene in any way He chooses. However, we must base our teaching and conduct on what the Scriptures actually teach, not on what might be possible with a sovereign, all powerful God.

In one sense, all theology puts God in a "box," that is, it describes the borders of the person and character of God. This theology that allegedly "limits" God, though, is based on God's own self-revelation, not on our private ideas of what God should be like. When God describes Himself and His ways, these are not "limits," but truths.

I've made my case regarding biblical decision-making based on what it looks like the Bible teaches, which is the real issue after all. If I'm right and the Bible actually teaches what I think it does, then I am not putting God in a box. Rather, I'm identifying the patterns God Himself has chosen to work by. I'm showing what seems to be the pattern of Scripture itself—especially in the New Testament, which is the most reliable guide for

the church today. The Bible simply does not encourage Christians to seek personalized guidance or assignments from God.

J.I. Packer notes: “God may reveal Himself and give guidance to His servants any way He pleases. It is not for us to set limits on Him. But it remains a question as to whether or not we are entitled to expect ‘hotline’ disclosures on a regular basis. The correct answer is no. All the biblical narratives of God’s direct communications with men are exceptional on the face of it, and the biblical model for personal guidance is quite different.”³

Here’s another point: It’s perilous to construct doctrine from historical material alone. It’s more sound to first develop one’s theology from the less ambiguous material in the Epistles. Then one can look for applications of those principles in the historical texts like Acts, the Gospels, or the Old Testament.

However, there is no support for the doctrine of hearing the voice of God in the place where all essential disciplines of Christian living must appear: the Epistles. Search for verification in the writings of any disciple. You’ll find nothing but silence. Why are the Apostles unanimously reticent on a capability that’s allegedly at the core of the Christian life?

Incidentally, which view is more limiting of God, the view that God is free to speak whenever He wants and He’s capable of making Himself heard even when we are not listening for Him (my view), or the view that we can only hear God when our inner selves get really quiet—so our own thoughts don’t drown Him out—and we listen intently for His voice?

Remember the basic points of this teaching. First, God can intervene any way He chooses. Second, in the Scriptures—especially in the New Testament—special intervention seems to follow a particular pattern (as noted in Session 1, II, G). Third, we are never encouraged to seek this special, personalized guidance. Fourth, the biblical pattern is that we make decisions based on God’s moral will and wisdom. Fifth, it is a serious thing to claim that God has given you a message. Even Jesus and the Apostles didn’t do this without corroboration.

Question 9: This seems so rationalistic, so worldly. Is such guidance personal?

The most compelling response I can give is simply this: If the wisdom approach is biblical, then it’s not worldly or rationalistic. The real issue is not how this approach seems to us, but whether the Bible teaches it. If it does, then no charge of worldliness succeeds.

Why would someone assume that simply using one’s mind is a worldly thing? The apostles apparently didn’t think it worldly or rationalistic. As I pointed out, in many cases the apostles explain their decisions with frankness, giving the attending reasons for their decisions. Yet for a very good reason they did not regard this process as carnal, impersonal, or humanistic: God was involved in every step of the decision-making process, though He was not deciding for them most of the time.

Certainly the Bible characterizes our relationship with God as personal. As I mentioned, there is a sense in which the Holy Spirit “speaks” to us. There’s also a sense

³Packer, 117.

in which God “has a plan for our lives.” But these concepts have morphed into something the biblical writers never intended.

When you raise a child you would not assume that teaching him to feed himself would somehow distance your relationship. However, though continuing to spoon-feed him into adulthood might be more “intimate” or “personal” in an odd sort of way, it would hardly be more desirable.

So, if by “personal” you mean, “Does God make personal choices for me by revealing his detailed blueprint for my life?” then I’d say the answer is no. If you mean, “Does this way of making decisions allow God into the process and bring me closer to Him? Does it allow me to build a personal relationship and give me the information I need so I can make godly decisions, fulfilling God’s purpose in my life?” then the answer is yes, very much so.

There’s another concern with this challenge. The question reflects what I think is an unbalanced and ultimately anemic view of Christianity. This indeed puts God in a box, locking Him into a spiritual realm where feelings rule and thinking, research, and reasoning are suspect because they are part of the material, physical (some Christians would say “fleshly”) realm. Other phrases that characterize this thinking are: “I want to turn off my mind and listen to the Spirit,” “All of God, none of me,” or “Let God speak to them. It’s not our job to judge.”

This isn’t Christianity; it’s Platonism. Such thinking is characterized by the attitude that the ideal for believers is to get personalized messages from the Lord. In the absence of God speaking (usually represented as our inability to hear) we’re stuck with the booby prize: the Bible. One caller actually said this to me on the radio: “Then all I have left is just the book!” How sad.

God is intimately involved in the whole process, giving us 1) His Word, 2) His Holy Spirit to illuminate His Word, 3) a new nature with the desire and ability to obey His moral will, 4) grace enabling us to trust Him, and 5) wisdom as we ask for it, 6) counselors and gifted people in the Body to assist us.

God works sovereignly to 1) open doors by making opportunities, 2) answer prayers related to our decisions, 3) bring to completion those plans that are within His sovereign will, 4) respond to our obedience to His moral will by producing spiritual fruit, and 5) work through all to accomplish His purposes in and through us.

In all we exercise trust, faith, and dependence on the Holy Spirit in our 1) confidence that God is in control of all, 2) obedience to His moral will and application of biblical principles, 3) prayer for wisdom, and 4) thanksgiving and submission to His sovereign will in the outcome of our plans.

Question 10: What should we pray for?

I don’t think it’s productive to simply pray “God’s will be done” on non-moral issues. It’s similar to saying, “God, do what you want,” which doesn’t seem to be the point of intercession. The exception would be a prayer of surrender to what you already know to be right (as with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane).

God wants us to pray specifically, but biblically. Some things to pray for would be wisdom (James 1:5), understanding God’s revealed will in the Bible, opportunities to

choose from, good counsel, your desires (what you want), spiritual strength to do what's right, and a submissive spirit to God's sovereign decision.

Sometimes when we pray about something we get a flood of ideas. I believe many of those things are from God. But we can't just assume that. We need to judge them individually. That's easier if a lot of "God is telling me" language doesn't get in the way. If it works out, give the glory to God. If it doesn't, then take responsibility for your own bad idea.

Pray like this: "God, you are Lord over my life today. And you can do with me what you want. Please help me to be sensitive to the leading and guiding of your Holy Spirit today in the sense that I apply godliness to the specific things I have to face. Help me by your Spirit, to know, specifically, how I can be the kind of person that you want me to be."

This is a very different kind of prayer from, "Lord, I want to know your perfect will for this situation. Please tell me what you want me to do." The first prayer reflects biblical teaching, the second does not.

Question 11: What if it's just my desire? My human reasoning is flawed and my flesh gets in the way.

First, your desires are valid elements in the process, as I've pointed out.

Also, according to 1 Corinthians 2:16 you have the mind of Christ. You have an increased ability to make sound decisions because you have a new dimension of spiritual discernment due to the new birth. It's not flawless yet, but certainly capable of making godly decisions, as Paul is quick to point out in 1 Corinthians 6:3-6 ("Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life? If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say this to your shame. Is there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?").

There's another problem. The process of hearing God's voice to make a decision is subject to the same liabilities of the flesh, maybe even more so because there are more subjective elements involved. There's no guarantee with either method that the flesh won't get in the way. The real question is, "What method is taught and practiced in the Scripture?" Following the biblical pattern is the safest way to avoid problems with the flesh.

Question 12: Why does the "blueprint method" seem to work many times?

When it works, it's usually because the person is employing the wisdom method in disguise, with a lot of added grief, doubt, guilt, uncertainty, and misdirected prayers.

Question 13: Doesn't the Holy Spirit speak to us about the correct interpretation of the Bible?

Some think getting a word from God is a substitute for careful Bible study. But it's bad advice to pray for the Holy Spirit to give you the right interpretation of a text.

Paul said, “All Scripture is God-breathed,” (2 Timothy 3:16), *graphe* in Greek. The writings are inspired and authoritative, not the interpretation we think the Holy Spirit is giving us. This is why the words should be our focus, not our feelings.

If you think God is telling you something through Scripture that is not connected to the meaning of the words in their context, it can’t be of God because God chose to communicate through language, not around it.

Yes, the Holy Spirit is our teacher, but that means He illuminates what’s already there. All teachers work from a body of information, clarifying it and passing it on. The Holy Spirit does not give new information not already evident in the inspired words. The curriculum, so to speak, is then standardized for all Christians. Every person has equal access to the meaning. There are no private messages in Scripture.

God took pains to give us an objective revelation in the words of the Bible to protect us from subjectivism. When Christians opt for an anointed “reading between the lines” instead of sound exegesis, it actually shows disrespect for God’s objective revelation.

Appendix 1

God's Special Directives in Acts

In Acts we have a focused look at a relatively short period of Bible history (30 years) in which there are radical manifestations of supernatural activity. Acts offers a best-case scenario for providing an inductive argument for the view that Christians ought to be receiving assignments from God—private, subjective revelations of God “speaking” to them. What do we find?

I went through Acts verse by verse looking for concrete examples of specialized guidance. Here is a list of every time God gave a special directive of any sort.

An angel rescues the Apostles from prison and tells them to preach the Gospel (5:19-20). Philip is sent to the Gaza road by an angel (8:26). Philip is directed to the Ethiopian eunuch by the Spirit (8:29). While traveling on the Damascus road, Saul hears the audible voice of Jesus directing him to Damascus (9:4-6). Ananias has a vision in which the Lord instructs him to visit Saul (9:10-16). Cornelius is instructed by an angel in a vision to send for Peter (10:3-6). Peter is instructed by the Spirit to visit Cornelius (10:19-20). Peter is ordered by an angel to follow him out of prison (12:7-8). Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the Holy Spirit on their first missionary journey (13:2). The Holy Spirit forbids Paul to speak the word in Asia (16:6-7). Paul is directed through a vision to Macedonia (16:9-10). Jesus appears to Paul in a vision and tells him to preach the Gospel in Corinth (18:9-10). Paul is told through prophecy not to enter Jerusalem (21:4). Jesus tells Paul in a vision to leave Jerusalem (22:18, 21).

How does God communicate these special directions? The majority (five) are communicated through visions. Three times an angel is the messenger. Four times the Spirit speaks. One is a prophecy. One other is the voice of Jesus.⁴

At first glance this list seems formidable, but the initial impression is misleading. The events represent a very small amount of activity considering the 30 year time span of Acts. God's specialized “assignments” to the leaders of the early church are limited to only 14 from the time of Pentecost.⁵

Two are jailbreaks. Two are about Saul's conversion. Two are about Cornelius' conversion. Two are about the Ethiopian eunuch's conversion. Two are about Paul's stay in Jerusalem (“Don't enter” and “Get out”). The remaining four are about Paul's missionary journeys (initially commissioned, directed away from Asia, directed to Macedonia, told to preach boldly in Corinth).

Notice a couple more significant facts. First, there is no mention in the entire biblical record of the early church when God gave an assignment through some inner “sensing.”

⁴There are five other examples of supernatural revelations that are predictive in nature, but do not dictate any direction—they give no assignments. In fact, in one case (Agabus' prophecy of imminent famine) the Christians determine on their own to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren in Judea. These examples can be found in Acts 11:27-30, 20:23, 21:11, 23:11, and 27:22-26.

⁵I did not include the casting of lots in Acts 1:15-26 for two reasons. First, this was not an example of the Holy Spirit speaking with an assignment from God. Second, opinions are divided whether this was directed by God or merely the disciple's misguided effort. The text doesn't indicate. Many think Paul was Judas' replacement.

Completely absent from the text are phrases like, “I feel led...,” “I think God is telling me...,” “I feel God is calling me...,” “I believe it’s God’s will that...,” “I’ve received lots of confirmation...,” “I’m sensing the Lord’s direction...,” or “I have a peace about it...”

The kind of language often used to describe the way God’s assignments are given is completely absent from the biblical record. There is no record of knowledge of God’s will based on “sensing” or internal promptings--not a single one. The rare times God gave special directives, He communicated in a clear and supernatural way. More than half the time He used a vision or an angel. This last is especially odd, given the contemporary references to “hearing the voice of God.”

Here’s another observation. In many Christian circles if you said, “God spoke to me,” it wouldn’t even raise an eyebrow. Announce you had a vision, though, and heads would turn. Admit angels were visiting and that might invite an exorcism. Yet there are abundant biblical precedents for the last two and virtually none for the first.

Second, there is no evidence that any of these directives are sought. There is no indication of any Christians, including Apostles, “waiting” for God’s direction. In the New Testament we find no pleading with God or laboring in prayer for God to show them His will or give them His assignment.

But there’s yet another serious problem.

No Divine Assignment

For balance we must also note other important decisions not directed by God. There are many examples in Acts when the disciples make decisions marking significant events in the life of the early church. They are the kind many would think require a word from the Lord. They entail decisions about the how, when, where, why, and who of ministry. Yet there is no evidence of any directive from God, and no indication the disciples even sought one. They simply weighed their options in light of circumstances and then chose a judicious course of action consistent with the prior general commands of the Lord.

Notable examples include Philip’s ministry in Samaria (8:5), resolving the complaint about the Hellenistic widows (6:1-6), and Barnabas and Saul establishing a teaching ministry for a year in Antioch (11:26). Elders are appointed in the new churches (14:23). The Jerusalem council resolves the problem of the Judaizers and the Galatian heresy (15:7-29). Paul embarks on his second and third missionary journeys (15:36, 18:23). Paul sets up shop as a tentmaker and starts a ministry in Corinth (18:3). Paul establishes a discipleship training program for two years at the school of Tyrannus (19:9). Paul has a healing ministry on the island of Malta for three months (28:9-11).

None of these decisions were a result of a special “assignment” from God. Rather, each was a unilateral decision made by the disciples who used wisdom to respond to the circumstances confronting them.

And these are just the tip of the iceberg. Altogether I found 70 such instances in the book of Acts alone, contrasted with the 14 occasions of specialized direction during that same time.⁶

⁶The full list of 70 examples can be found on the Stand to Reason web site at www.str.org under “Divine Direction in Acts.”

Even more can be found in the Epistles. Paul chastises the Corinthians for not working out their own legal differences (1 Corinthians 6:3-6). He does not counsel them to seek a decision from God. Instead he asks, “Is there not among you *one wise man* who will be able to decide between his brethren?”

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul gives the most thorough instruction to be found in the Bible on the issue of marriage. He details pros and cons of single life over married life. He solemnly notes the moral obligations of both. He then leaves the decision in the hands of the believer. There is no hint in this passage that a believer must “hear from the Lord” even on the weighty matter of choosing a spouse.

Peter gives explicit instruction about the use of spiritual gifts in ministry (1 Peter 4:10-11). He doesn’t say to wait for one’s calling—nor does any other passage of Scripture. Instead, given that each believer has a spiritual gift, Peter enjoins him to employ it in works of service as a good steward, doing all to God’s glory.

It’s simply mistaken to claim the early church was consistently “led” by the Spirit in this sense. There is neither a biblical directive nor a biblical pattern of receiving such assignments from God.

Appendix 2

Wisdom from Proverbs on Decision Making

Man plans; God works through the plans:

Proverbs 16:9: “The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps.”

Proverbs 19:21: “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand.”

Proverbs 21:31: “The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord.”

Trust in God’s sovereignty:

Proverbs 21:30: “There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord.”

Proverbs 27:1: “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth.”

Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

The importance of knowledge:

Proverbs 13:16: “Every prudent man acts with knowledge, but a fool displays folly.”

Proverbs 19:2: “Also it is not good for a person to be without knowledge, and he who makes haste with his feet errs.”

Appendix 3

Moral and Wisdom Principles for Choosing a Wife

Here is an example of how I applied the wisdom model to the issue of choosing a wife. It's a list of guidelines from Scripture one needs to consider when choosing a bride (women will need to make a few adjustment concerning husbands, but you get the idea). In addition to the moral consideration of choosing someone who is a committed Christian (2 Corinthians 6:14-18), men should also asked the following questions. Is she:

- Someone you can endeavor to love as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25)?
- Already beginning to show respect for you as the head of your relationship (Ephesians 5:33)?
- Showing a willingness to be subject to your leadership (Ephesians 5:24)?
- Someone you as a husband can be subject to in the fear of the Lord (there is a type of submission that works both ways: Ephesians 5:21)?
- Someone you can joyfully fulfill your sexual responsibilities to (1 Corinthians 7:3-5, Proverbs 5:15-20)?
- Someone you can live in peace with (1 Corinthians 7:15)?
- Someone you can provide for adequately (1 Timothy 5:8)?
- Someone who allows you to exercise your spiritual gifts (1 Peter 4:10)?
- Prudent (Proverbs 19:14)?
- Not contentious or vexing (Proverbs 21:9, 25:24, 27:15, 21:19)?
- Someone who will be an industrious, contributing member of the household, fulfilling domestic duties, hospitable and kind, with a positive outlook on life, and possesses strength and dignity (Proverbs 31:13-27)?
- Someone who fears the Lord (Proverbs 31:30)?
- Chaste and respectful (1 Peter 3:2)?
- Kindhearted, not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead (1 Peter 3:8-9)?
- Someone you are happy to be with (1 Corinthians 7:40)?
- Committed to the priority of fulfilling her God-given role and responsibilities as a wife?
- An excellent woman (Proverbs 30:10)?