

The Net That So Easily Entangles Us, Part 1

Monitoring Our Inner Impressions to Determine God's Will

by Geoff Volker

The following examples serve as excellent models for how not to seek the WILL OF GOD. It is my desire that if one or more of these examples fits you -- please do not be offended. But if the shoe fits...

Example No. 1

There I was, driving down Route 51, when all of a sudden I felt this strong compulsion to turn left at the next street, I had an appointment to keep, and if I made the upcoming turn there would be no way that I could keep my appointment. Was this the Holy Spirit speaking through my INNER MAN? How was I to know? If I did not turn left would I be sinning and in violation of a clear leading of the Spirit of God? Would I be quenching the Spirit?

Example No. 2

I had just graduated from college and had to make a decision between two job offers. I was married and had a mother that needed constant care and attention. How was I to know which job offer to accept? Both offered the same salary and benefits. One company was located across the country while the other was situated in the same town where I and my mother were presently living. My father died this past year. My mother has had a difficult time making the transition into the single life of a widow.

As I pondered and prayed over my decision, I experienced an overwhelming peace concerning the job offer across the country. The more I prayed about it the more calm I felt concerning that job. I admit that some good Christian friends have counseled me to take the offer close to home so that I could look after my mother. But, how can I deny the undeniable leading of the Spirit of God that I am experiencing?

Example No. 3

My prayer life is the most precious part of my Christian life. When I go to the Lord in prayer I take my requests before Him, as the Bible clearly says to do, and then I quiet my heart and I wait upon Him to speak to my heart concerning my prayer requests. When He speaks to me it is always through my INNER MAN, through His STILL SMALL VOICE. This intimate communication with my Heavenly Father is the delight of my Christian life. I can't imagine having a satisfying relationship with my Lord without this intimate prayer experience.

Hermeneutics of the Worst Sort

The following passages of Scripture are often used to defend the notion that God does indeed guide us in an authoritative manner through our INNER MAN, or our emotions.

Colossians 3:15 (NIV)

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace."

Here we have the popular proof text for using the PEACE OF CHRIST as the key factor in determining God's will for your life in a given situation. When you are faced with a decision you are to choose the option that you have PEACE about. The idea behind this method is that it is the Holy Spirit who is giving this peace to direct you toward finding God's will. This method has many problems. The main problem is with the context of this verse. Colossians 3:15 falls in the midst of a section of Scripture that is describing how believers are to get along with one another.

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Colossians 3:12-14 (NIV)

When the Apostle Paul says to "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts," he is referring to getting along with each other and not to a method for determining God's will for your life! In every aspect of our relations with other believers we are to let the desire to be at peace with one another RULE in our hearts. We are not to let the desire to not get along with each other RULE in our hearts. Be forewarned ... we should always, always, take the time to check the CONTEXT.

Romans 8:14 (NIV)

"Because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."

The LEADING of the Holy Spirit is, in my opinion, one of the most misunderstood concepts among believers today. The popular understanding of the LEADING of the Spirit is: When you experience an inner compulsion or desire to do or not to do a certain thing, interpret this as the Spirit of God moving you in a particular direction or course of action. In all fairness it should be stated that most of the folks who use this method do so only after they have determined that the LEADING is not in violation with any Scripture.

Once again, the problem with the common understanding of the LEADING of the Holy Spirit is that it is based on out-of-context Scripture. Romans 8:5-9 is a description of a believer and an unbeliever.

"Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what the nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind CONTROLLED by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those CONTROLLED by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are CONTROLLED not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." Romans 8:5-9 (NIV)

The point of this passage of Scripture is that every believer will experience a changed life through the work of the Holy Spirit. This work of the Spirit is called being CONTROLLED by the Spirit. This concept of control does not refer to something that we are supposed to do. No! Being CONTROLLED by the Spirit is something that happens to all believers simply because they are believers. When Jesus Christ died on the cross he purchased not only forgiveness of sin, but also a changed life for all those the father had given him. Therefore, every believer will

experience a changed life. This transformation is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8 calls this being CONTROLLED by the Spirit.

Verses 12-13 of chapter 8 continue this argument by describing how we ought to live in light of what the Spirit is doing within us.

"Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation -- but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live." Romans 8:12-13 (NIV)

The point the Apostle Paul is making is that you will not get to heaven without a changed life. But, lest you get concerned that you might not be able to muster up that changed life, Paul immediately goes on to say in verse 14 that all true believers, sons of God, are being LED by the Spirit of God into a changed life. The concept of LED in verse 14 is identical to the concept of CONTROLLED in verses 5-9.

This passage has nothing whatsoever to do with the believer's search for the will of God. It is only describing what will happen to all Christians. All believers are being LED by the spirit of God into a changed life in Jesus Christ. Please not that in saying that God LEADS all believers I am not saying that believers are not responsible to live for their Lord. I am only saying that the concept of LEADING in the Bible has nothing to do with our search for the will of God.

Galatians 5:18 (NIV)

"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law."

Here we have the only other place in the New Testament where the term LED is used. Once again as we examine the context we will find that this passage has nothing to do with discovering the will of God. In verses 16-17 we find a description of the spiritual battle that goes on inside of every believer.

"So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." Galatians 5:16-17 (NIV)

Paul, in describing this battle, is not depicting a hopeless situation. For he goes on to say in verses 18 that if the Spirit is LEADING you then you will experience a changed life and grow in Jesus Christ. Since all true believers are being LED by the Spirit they are not like those Israelites under the Mosaic Law who, though they were called the people of God. Oh sure, there were some real believers among the Israelites. But as a whole, they were a nation of unbelievers who were called to obey the Law of Moses, the LAW, without experiencing the changed life brought about by the Holy Spirit. So, if you are LED by the Spirit, then the Spirit is motivating you to obey your Lord. You are experiencing a transforming work of the Holy Spirit. You are not under LAW, the curse of trying to obey God's Law without a corresponding regenerated heart, as were the Israelites. Rather, you are being LED by the Spirit. You will experience a changed life. You will not stay the same. You are, to use the term of Romans 8, CONTROLLED by the Holy Spirit.

Book to Recommend

Decision Making & the Will of God by Garry Friesen. (Multnomah Press, Portland, Oregon: 451 pgs, 1981; paperback.)

This book is by far the best there is on the subject. In making this claim I must also add that my article on the WILL OF GOD in this REVIEW is largely dependent on Friesen's work.