

The Net That So Easily Entangles Us, Part 2

Monitoring Our Inner Impressions to Determine God's Will

by Geoff Volker

In the last WHITEFIELD REVIEW I analyzed some of the passages of Scripture that are most often used to defend the idea that God speaks to us in an AUTHORITATIVE way through our emotions or inner impressions. Some think that God the Holy Spirit communicates to His people by this means. They also believe that to deny the validity of this inward communication of the Spirit is to reject the most intimate part of our Christian life.

An Interpretive Nightmare

Another section of Scripture that is commonly used to defend the above view is 1 Kings 19:11-14.

1 Kings 19:11-14 (NIV)

"The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.'"

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

The "gentle whisper" or the "still small voice" (KJV) is argued to be the Holy Spirit communicating through our emotions. Is this even possible? The context of these verses has to do with the historical account of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). Elijah challenges the 450 prophets of Baal to call on their god to set fire to the prepared sacrifice. When they cannot bring about any response from their god, Elijah prepares his sacrifice and calls upon the Lord God. Not only does the Lord set fire to the sacrifice; He consumes the sacrifice altar and all. Following this display of God's power, Elijah has the people put the 450 prophets of Baal to death. As a result, Jezebel, the wicked queen, threatens to kill Elijah. Elijah then panics and runs to Mt. Sinai in the desert. It is here that our passage of Scripture picks up the story. God tells Elijah to stand on the mountain and He will pass by. The Lord sends a powerful wind, and earthquake, and a fire, but says that He is not in any of those. He then sends a "gentle whisper." When Elijah heard this he knew that the Lord was about to speak to him. He is then said to have pulled his cloak over his head and stood at the entrance to the cave to await the word of the Lord.

Now, let's examine the context. Please note that the gentle whisper is only used to get Elijah's attention. God does not speak to him in a gentle whisper! And, the gentle whisper does NOT take place through his emotions or his inner man. The gentle whisper was an audible sound that could have been recorded by a cheap tape recorder. It was not an impression. 1 Kings 19:11-14 is not remotely about our God communicating to us through our emotions. It is rather an account of the Lord actually getting Elijah's attention by a gentle whisper and then talking to him.

The Subjective CANNOT Communicate Authoritatively

The question is not whether our God is involved in our impressions or feelings. I rather assume He is, inasmuch as He controls all things and is involved in all things. The question that plagues us is this; is there any way we can be sure our impression is from God? How can I know for sure that what I am feeling is a communication from God to me? I would like to suggest that there is no way you can know for sure whether the feeling or impression you are experiencing is a means of communication from the Holy Spirit.

When well intentioned believers say that God spoke to them, what most of them mean is that they have experienced a feeling or impression which they have INTERPRETED to mean that God is telling them something. Any feeling or impression that comes from within us falls in to the subjective realm. We cannot be certain about anything that falls within the subjective realm. How do I know whether a particular feeling that has come upon me is the spirit trying to communicate with me or just my feelings playing tricks with me because of lack of sleep or too much pizza the night before? How do I know whether an impression that I am experiencing is Spirit-given direction or just something that has surfaced from my subconscious? We cannot be sure about anything that comes from within us -- that is from the subjective realm

The Scriptures are Our ONLY Source of Authority!

What we need is an objective outside authority that can sit in judgment on our feelings or impressions. Our Lord in His goodness has provided such an objective authority; it is the Word of God. In Ephesians 5:17 we have the statement that we are to "know" the Lord's will.

Ephesians 5:17 (NIV)

"Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is."

This passage Scripture is stating that we can know God's will for sure. Actually, it says more than that. It says that not only can we know the will of God, but also that we are supposed to know the will of God. Now, how can this refer to the Spirit communicating to us through our emotions or impressions if we can never be sure if our emotions or impressions are from God or not? The answer to this question is found in the Moral Will of God.

The Moral Will is another name for the Bible. We are commanded to know the will of God. The only objective source of the will of God is Scripture. Ephesians 5:17 is calling all believers to know what the Bible wants them to do in any given situation. The bible does seem to be saying that it is all sufficient for providing God's will for the believer.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of god may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Another verse of Scripture that describes the will of God as the Word of God is Acts 20:27. Here the Apostle Paul is giving his farewell address to the elders of the church at Ephesus.

Acts 20:27

"For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God."

It makes sense that only the Bible can really reveal the will of God because it comes to us in the form of words and sentences and in a context that can be checked. If we have a question about

what a particular passage means, we have the means to verify whether or not it is saying what we think it is saying. The Bible cannot be made to say anything you want it to say, if you are handling it like any other form of literature. Words have specific meaning that can be determined by comparing the Scripture you are studying with other relevant passages as well as by analyzing its context.

Only the will of God as revealed in the Bible is CHECKABLE. To seek to find the will of God through our emotions or impressions is to go on a fool's errand.

Now Back to Our Examples from Part 1 (Sept.-92 WHITEFIELD REVIEW)

Example No. 1

Here I am, driving down Route 51, when all of a sudden I feel this strong compulsion to turn left at the next street. What am I to make of this impression? Is it the Lord guiding me by the Holy Spirit? Is it simply a feeling? If I do not turn left at the next street will I be sinning? The answer to this, in the words of Garry Friesen who wrote *Decision-Making and the Will of God*, is that "an impression is just an impression." Because I have no way of knowing for sure whether the impression that I experienced was a communication from God or not, I am not bound to obey it. I am free to turn left at the next street on route 51 as long as I would not be violating any of the Moral Will of God (the Bible). The only way that I would be sinning by not turning left would be if I were to break the law of God (one of the commands in the Scriptures).

1 John 3:4 (NIV)

"Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawless."

Since we can never be sure about an impression, because it is in the subjective realm and therefore not checkable, all we can say is that "an impression is an impression."

All sorts of impressions hit us all day long. If we believed that we were to obey them if they were of the Lord then we would be in constant torment, for we have no way to be sure of their origin. Besides, the Bible never tells us to look outside of itself for authoritative direction. It should be mentioned that prophecy, a direct word from the Lord, would seem to be an exception to the rule. But prophecy is not the Spirit communicating to us through our emotions. It is God speaking to us in audible words.

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 (my father had just died). 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 my mother and I were living. As I pondered this decision I experienced an overwhelming peace concerning the job offer across the country. What was I supposed to do? Was I experiencing the direction of the Spirit in my life?

The answer to this is rather simple. Regardless of any feeling that I am experiencing, it is only the Word of God authoritatively guide me. I only follow my feelings when the Scriptures back them up. An example of this would be guilt feelings. When I feel guilty how do I know whether I really am guilty of something? The only way I can know is to go to the Bible and see if I have violated one of the commands. If I have, then I must ask my Father in heaven to forgive me. If I

find that I have not violated any of the commands, I must assume that the feeling of guilt I am experiencing is in reality false guilt that ought to be ignored.

In this example the Bible does speak to the situation. In I Timothy 5:8 we find a clear statement describing the responsibilities of the Christian man to take care of his relatives.

I Timothy 5:8 (NIV)

"If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."

As long as he does not put himself into a situation where he is violating this Scripture by his choice of jobs, then he is free to choose any job.

Example No. 3

When I go to the Lord in prayer ought I to quiet my heart and expect God to speak to me through my inner man, that is, through my emotions? We have already seen in this article that the STILL SMALL VOICE is not the Spirit communicating to us through our emotions, but rather an audible sound made to get Elijah's attention so God could talk to him. Nowhere in the Bible are we directed to expect any authoritative communication by the Holy Spirit through our emotions. When we experience an impression or feeling while in prayer, might it not be from the Lord? Yes, that might be true. But the only way we have of knowing anything for sure is if we go to the Word of God to see whether it backs up our feeling or impression.

An example might go something like this. While in prayer, I, a teenager, am impressed to make a call to a friend. Is this of the Lord? If my father has previously told me that I cannot make any more calls on the phone, I must ignore this impression. To follow the impression would be to disobey my parents which the Bible does not allow. What if I am under no phone calling restrictions? Then I am free to call, though not obligated to call. If I did not call I would not be sinning. Once again, the reason I would not be sinning is that I would not be violating a command of Scripture. BEWARE OF UNDERMINING THE WORD OF GOD!

There is nothing wrong with feelings; I rather like them. They make our life rich and full. My point is, when we look inward for the Holy Spirit to communicate to us we are denying that the Word of God is the authoritative Word from God. Feelings and impressions can come from all sorts of places. The bottom line is they are subjective, not checkable, and therefore not authoritative. To look inward for your authoritative direction from the Lord is truly to be on a FOOL'S ERRAND.