

Review

We have for five Sunday evenings considered the role of the law of God as the principle foundation for Christian ethics, the principle direction for our conduct in the world. But, it is not the only direction we are given, the only means by which we are to determine what is right and what is wrong, what we should do and what we should not do. In fact, in order to use the law of God aright we must use it in connection with the other foundations or bases of righteous living that are furnished us in the gospel and in Holy Scripture.

The next of these foundations I want us to consider is **the guidance of the Holy Spirit.**

This, like the law of God, is likewise a controversial topic with evangelicals holding very different opinions. It is common to hear Christian folk defend a course of action they have taken or to explain why they chose to do one thing or another by saying, in one way or another, that the Lord directed them in this way or that. Sometimes they put it more explicitly: the Lord told them to do this or that. Other times they will speak of the Lord "opening doors" or "laying a thought or a matter on their heart," or the Lord "led them to do so and so," and so on.

We are so used to hearing this way of speaking that we do not often stop to consider what it means and what is being claimed. Ministers often tell us that the Lord laid a particular text upon their hearts and that is why they are preaching it that morning; at Presbytery meetings we hear men speak of the Lord calling them into the ministry; the leader at prayer meetings may well encourage participation by exhorting those present to pray "as the Lord leads you," and on and on.

Now, we are perhaps ready to admit that there may be problems here. After all, we have, most of us, encountered people, or at least heard of people, who claimed to have been led by the Lord into some business venture that seems highly risky, even unethical; or to undertake some ministry for which we may feel the person highly unsuited. I have a friend, a minister of my acquaintance, who referred to the married woman with whom he had an affair, as God's gift to him. God, in other words, had led him into this relationship and into the betrayal of his own wife and his ministry. A faith healer, exposed on a TV news magazine a few years ago, claimed that **the Holy Spirit had told him** to pretend that he was getting information about those coming forward to be healed from revelations received directly from the Holy Spirit, when, in fact, his staff had collected the information in "pre-healing interviews" and was communicating it to him by means of radio transmission to a small receiver in his ear. **Well, we know that isn't right, these are not Christian ethics. But, then, how do we know that the minister got his text directly from God for**

that Sunday morning, or that the Lord really did tell that young man to become a minister? If we deny the validity of such direct communications or divine leading in the one case how can we validate it in the other?

What are we to think of this way of speaking about our behavior as being directed personally by God and of ourselves as receiving such direction **directly** from heaven?

Donald Macleod, one of the Reformed Church's very best theologians, professor at the Free Church College in Edinburgh, in his little work on the Holy Spirit, writes this about such ways of speaking about the divine direction of our lives. [The Spirit of Promise, pp. 57-58.]

Young Christians react to this ideology in two ways. Many quickly conclude that because they lack such experiences [i.e. of direct guidance] they are very poor Christians, if indeed they are Christians at all. Others, more impressionable, seek the experiences they hear so much of, adopt the canonical terminology and soon begin, like everyone else, to feel led and spoken to.

We are now so familiar with this thought-world as to be completely unconscious of the staggering claims it involves. In effect, the people concerned are saying that they receive special revelations. God has revealed to them that they should marry or change jobs or become ministers or missionaries.

One problem with this is that it puts pressure on the rest of the Christian community. Revelation cannot bind only the person who receives it. It binds everyone else as well. If God has revealed to someone that he is calling him to be a minister, He is also revealing that He requires the church to recognize, train, license and ordain him. It then becomes sacrilegious to ask questions implying a doubt or a desire to test the call. Who are we to question God's revelation? This probably explains why in every branch of the church people are admitted to the ministry who are unsuited to the work. How can a mere committee ask mundane questions about health, academic background, spiritual gifts, and working experience of an applicant to whom God has spoken directly.

In fact the claims go beyond what the church enjoyed even when God was clearly giving her canonical special revelation. During that time certain men undoubtedly received direct disclosures of the divine mind. But the privilege was not common to all believers. It was confined to prophets who received an audience with God, heard his secrets and were commissioned to act as his spokesmen. The rest of the believing community were not spoken to directly. They

received their guidance from the prophets.

Conceivably things might have changed under the New Testament and every single believer receive special revelation as he receives Spirit baptism. But this is not what we find... [e.g. Paul and Barnabas called to missionary work by prophets; a vision to come to Macedonia given to an apostle, etc.]

Now, before I go any further with this I want to warn you about something. I know that I should because I always find people responding to the teaching I'm about to give you about guidance in this way. It may strike you that I don't believe that God is really at work in people's lives, or that I don't believe in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. I believe both things absolutely! But, listen to what I will say and test it against the Scriptures themselves and then, if you have questions, we can talk together about them afterwards.

But, let me tell you first where I am going. I am going to argue that guidance of this direct and mystical type is not promised us in Holy Scripture -- indeed, we are told to find the way to right living in very different ways than to expect it to be given us directly by the Holy Spirit's speaking to us --; further, I will argue that, as a matter of simple fact, we are never told in Holy Scripture how to know whether God is speaking to us in that way, if, in fact he does, and so how to distinguish his voice from, say, the Devil's (who, after all, is accustomed to disguising himself as an angel of light) or from our own inner voice, communicating what we want to believe are God's thoughts but which, we can see so clearly in other cases, are simply the person's own desires.

G.K. Chesterton warned that it is a very short step from worshipping the divine light or voice within Jones to Jones worshipping himself.

I do not say that we cannot receive guidance from the Spirit of God, only that we are not taught by him to expect to receive it in this direct and immediate way, as revelation given to us by God directly.

This topic will require two Sunday evenings, so we will return to it, Lord willing, next Sunday night. But, let me begin tonight at the beginning, with the biblical context.

Ethics is the study of the will of God. What does God want me to do? How does he wish that I should live? Now the Bible uses the word "will" and the idea of the "will of God" in two different ways. Sometimes it uses that word to speak of God's counsel, his sovereign plan according to which all things unfold in the world.

Sometimes from the divine point of view:

Eph. 1:11 "...according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his own will"
 Ps. 115:3 "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him in heaven and on earth."
 Matt. 10:29 "Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of your Father in heaven."

And sometimes from the point of view of its execution and realization in the life of mankind:

1 Cor. 1:1 "Apostle by the will of God"
 John 1:13 "...born not of the will of man but of God."
 1 Peter 4:19 "...those who suffer according to God's will."

At other times the Bible uses that word and that idea to refer to the revealed will of God, his commands.

1 Thess. 4:3 "...it is God's will that you should be holy."
 Mark 3:35 "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."
 Eph. 6:6 "Slaves obey your masters...doing the will of God from your heart."

Now, what is very important to notice is that while the Bible uses the term "will" and the idea of the will of God in these two ways, evangelical Christians use the idea in three ways, but the third way does not appear in Holy Scripture!

They speak of "finding God's will" and mean by this discovering what God wants me to do, what choice he wants me to make. Many Christians use this concept of the will of God with respect to guidance and, especially, in cases of the "which path should I take" variety.

What we mean by this is that there is a plan that God has for our lives, a path he wants us to take. He has mapped out a perfect life for us which we will live if only, at every fork in the road, we make the right choice. When we make the wrong choice, when we are --as it is often put-- "out of God's will" (by which is meant not that we have broken some commandment but that we have made a choice he didn't intend for us to make) then we get off the path God planned for us and intended for us and who can say what might happen to us then.

It thus becomes very important for us to learn what choices God wants us to make: where to go to college, whom to marry, what job to take, where to live, what house to buy, etc. Our being in God's plan A depends upon our making these choices as God wants for us to make them. But, how are we to know the right choice?

The Bible won't tell you which job offer to take or what man or woman to marry.

It is at this point that this expectation of immediate guidance given directly to the soul by the Lord comes into play. And it is for this reason that people believe in such guidance so strongly. If we have to know what choices to make, then somehow God must tell us, and so people believe that he will and does.

Now, it is very interesting that this is exactly the view of divine guidance that was widely held in the ANE during the days of the OT writings. The ancient world was thoroughly absorbed in the pursuit of such knowledge -- that is, what the will of the gods was, so that man might choose accordingly and so choose wisely.

1. In the ANE divination (the science of discovering the intentions of the gods ahead of time) was a highly developed science whose practitioners were some of the most important members of any court. Remember them in Egypt being asked to interpret the dreams and in Daniel's day in Babylon?

2. 90% of the cuneiform texts discovered by archaeologists have to do with divination, finding out the will of the gods. The library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal was most divination texts.

3. The chief source of such knowledge was the study of the liver of animals. Cf. Ezekiel 21:21: "For the King of Babylon will stop at the fork in the road, at the junction of the two roads, to seek an omen: He will cast lots with arrows, he will consult his idols, he **will examine the liver.**"

Horoscopes came into vogue as means of divination only after 500 B.C.

Now, this makes it all the more interesting and the more important that the Bible **forbids divination**. Deut. 18:10: "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens...etc."

And, as I said, the Bible does not teach us that our lives depend for their good and blessing in any respect on decisions based on inside information obtained in advance by any such means. The Bible does not use the idea of "will of God" in this way. It never teaches us how we might discover this will of God if we needed to. It never tells us that we need such advance information. It's view of guidance is completely different than this.

But, before going on next week to construct the Bible's doctrine of guidance, let me add in closing some problems with this widespread view that ethical living requires such direct and

immediate communication of God's will and purpose to the soul.

1. First, the effort to demonstrate that this is to be a part of any true Christian experience -- these direct revelations from God -- misuses the Bible and mistakes the history of salvation.

It is certainly true, no Christian doubts it, that God has communicated directly to men by means of visions, dreams, voices from heaven, and other means no doubt. But to whom were such revelations given? Not to ordinary believers but to prophets, apostles, and the like.

To acknowledge that **Paul** was prevented from preaching in Asia and that he was given a vision of a man of Macedonia saying "Come over and help us" is not at all to say that Christians are to expect such communications themselves. They worked miracles, but we do not.

Gideon sought special guidance from the Lord to assure himself of the rightness of what he was about to do and it was given to him, but that is far from saying that we will be given the same guidance. Gideon was about to kill large numbers of human beings in the prosecution of a holy war. He was to be the instrument of divine judgment upon the enemies of Israel. It was a different situation than that which most Christians face in their lives and he had a different office than we have.

2. Because those divine communications were real supernatural things and not in anyway manufactured in the imagination, our efforts to imitate them and duplicate them always produce something obviously manufactured and imaginary.

I grew up hearing a great deal about "fleeces." When people needed to know what God wanted them to do, they would "lay out a fleece," so it was called. They would do as Gideon did. **But, of course, they did no such thing.**

They would tell the Lord that whoever called them next was the one they should marry, or if the coin turned up heads he should go to college (Dr. Schaeffer did this when his father objected to his preparing for the ministry and he needed to know that God **really** wanted him to act in the face of his father's disapproval). But, of course, these are eventualities that would ordinarily occur. So with "lucky-dipping."

[We all know stories, such as Dr. Schaeffer's where the Lord seems to have honored such "fleeces." However, remember those are the only stories you hear and there are plenty of others like them that are less pretty. John Wesley, for example, cast a lot to tell George Whitefield that he should not go to America to preach and later it was a lot that convinced him that he should print his

sermon against Whitefield and Whitefield's doctrine of sovereign grace that did such harm to the unity of the Great Awakening. Wesley certainly felt and wanted his readers to feel that the lot was proof that his Arminian views were true and Calvinism was falsehood.]

These are not the same thing. If you want to lay out a fleece do what Gideon did! And you will find the dew on both two nights running. (A friend of mine at College decided to come to Covenant in part because, lying on her back looking up at the clouds one day, she saw them, she thought, form a "C." But how did she know it wasn't Calvin, or Cornell, or Campbell, or California, or Cambridge? Do you not see how easily we can thus baptize our own desires and call them the voice of God? We call it blasphemy when others do this, but we should be very careful that we are not doing it ourselves.

These divination practices are not biblical, they are pagan -- they rest on a pagan view of God and his will and his relationship with mankind and his people -- and they are forbidden in Holy Scripture.

Christian ethics, the living of a holy life, the doing of the right thing **never** in Scripture requires us to know information that God has about the future, about his plans for us; and, if it did, the Bible gives us no way to discover that knowledge with any certainty. Rather the Bible has a very different doctrine of guidance and of decision making. We will consider that next Lord's Day evening, Lord willing.