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But faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. ... Paul shows the Spirit to be the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike air or beat upon our ears.

John Calvin

What the Spirit does is exactly what the Lord does; the Spirit's work is not an additional or special work beyond the Lord's; the Spirit is the Lord at work.

Frederick D. Bruner

Led By the Spirit

Jim Elliff

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, *because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God* (Rom. 8:12-14, emphasis mine).

It is patently obvious from the above passage that every true Christian is *led by the Spirit*. But here God does not mean anything more or less than that work of the Spirit which is notably moral. It is the Spirit of God who guides the believer into loving obedience to God, engendering distaste for the flesh and love for the pure; empowering against the flesh and toward our spiritual obligations. Therefore, if we make it mandatory (as these verses certainly do) that every real Christian has the experience of being led by God, we are decidedly *not* requiring anything mystical in that leadership at all. I know of no Christian who does not have this moral guidance, though there are many pretenders. The writer of Hebrews asserts its nonmystical nature when he reports that God has said: "I will put My laws in their *minds* and write them on their hearts" (8:10b, emphasis mine).

Even the statement of Christ in John 10:27 ("My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me") is an explanation of the assumed communion between the believer and Christ *unto* obedience. He is not saying that every believer has a life of mystical invasions by God, but rather is speaking of the normal experience of any believer in living fellowship with Christ as that which promotes following Him in explicit obedience. I do not mean that the work of the Spirit is not supernatural, but that it is not required to be unusual and direct, as if circumventing the mind and the reasoning process.

This moral leadership of the Spirit is again seen in Galatians 5:16-18 where Paul speaks of the conflict between flesh and Spirit, ending with this: *But if you are led by the*

Spirit, you are not under law. This leadership is distinctively moral and not a bit mystical. Therefore I think that the believer who does not have a long list of mystical experiences of guidance to report must take heart. He is not forgotten by God, nor is he a second-class Christian in any respect, but is one of those who is an authentic *follower* of God. But is this all we are to know in terms of guidance?

John 16:13-15 speaks of another aspect of guidance:

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will *guide you into all truth*. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to Me by taking from what is Mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is Mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is Mine and make it known to you (emphasis mine).

Here Christ speaks of guidance into *truth*. This guidance of the Holy Spirit is also the experience of every true believer. When Jesus said, “If you hold to My teaching [actually, *abide in My Word*, meaning to remain under its moral persuasion or to *consistently obey* His Word], you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). No one could be His disciple without this obedience to His Word—the Jews to whom He was speaking were to understand that their condition was one of being disobedient to the Word. The result of this is that the real disciple will be led into more truth—liberating truth! Did not Paul refer to every true believer when he said: “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, *that we may understand what God has freely given us*” (1 Cor. 2:12, emphasis mine)? The others “cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (v. 14). This guidance of the Spirit into truth is surely what Christ referred to when He said that His sheep *never* follow the voice of a

stranger (John 10:5).

Guidance into truth is carried out in the way Jesus expressed to His disciples in John 14:26. “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” This is the two-fold manifestation of truth to the believer. First, the Holy Spirit instructs; second, He reminds. Again, the believer who has had the ability, the genuine capacity, to understand and cling to truth has been the recipient of this guidance. John said that we have this permanent anointing, meaning the Holy Spirit, and “you do not need anyone to teach you. But as His anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in Him” (1 John 2:27). John could not mean that we are to avoid receiving teaching from men, for he himself is teaching them through the Epistle. Rather he means that this unique knowledge, the capacity to know and embrace truth, is a gift of the Holy Spirit within you and is not at all found in others outside the body of Christ. There is nothing mystical about it; it is going on by virtue of the Spirit’s indwelling in conjunction with His already revealed Word. This is called illumination, and does not bypass the processes of the mind at all. Teaching presupposes the mental process; being reminded assumes the same. So you may say confidently, “I am guided by the Spirit into truth.”

But now we move into the third aspect of guidance concerning which our confidence level drops—the guidance of the Spirit in nonmoral issues, or the guidance received about issues not directly informed by Scripture.

How Does God Guide in Nonmoral Issues?

How do we respond to the question, “Just how does God lead the believer in these matters of personal concern which have no biblical information to command them?”

Evangelicalism responds in such variety to this question that the average believer is left in a quandary. Notable among the olio of answers is what we may call “illumination” (as distinguished from illumination). That is to say, the illuminist has gained his sense of guidance from God by a series of impressions, directly impacting the spirit (as he might say it). The illuminist is often wary of the reasoning process. There should certainly be caution about trusting in bare unaided reason, yet the illuminist often goes so far as to disparage any hope that reason can be useful. (“This doesn’t come from me; it comes from God.”) The noble Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians were at this place when the Count founded “A Society of Little Fools.” He wrote that the members “...were not to use their own brains; they were to wish they had no brains; they were to be like little children in arms....”¹ It is well known that the Moravians practiced such strange customs as casting lots and opening the pages of the Bible at random. On the other end is the cold intellectualist who has no place whatsoever for any more direct intervention of God in any other way than through mere reason.

I have a genuine appreciation for the intentions of many sincere illuminists. For one thing, they take seriously the imminence of God. To them God will not be far removed—no distant Landlord. They also hunger for the demonstration of God’s power and life in their midst, both for their own joy (not a bad motive, John 16:24) and the witness it affords to others. When I lived in this kind of practice myself, I found much excitement and anticipation. I was deeply sincere; my aim was God’s glory, as far as I could tell. I am not sure but that God values the heart and faith of many sincere illuminists. Nor, as I will say again, am I sure that He does not bless them—though perhaps for other reasons than their method of guidance.

Just how does God speak? Interestingly, the Bible an-

swers our question by showing that God speaks in any way He wants! God has guided men in history with the casting of lots, fleeces, deep impressions, angelic visitations, visions, inner burdens, the recalling of Bible prophecy, cosmic signs, prophetic utterances, dreams, theophanies, etc. He has been very creative in His communications. It might be assumed, then, from the *experience* of Scripture alone that the average child of God will be always, or at least often, guided in these more or less direct and dynamic ways. Is this assumption correct? Let me express my growing understanding of this problem in three statements:

1. The mystical intervention of God for personal guidance is not commanded or implied as part and parcel with what it means in the Bible to be a normal Christian; nor is such guidance ruled out. We know that the guidance of the Spirit in a rational way toward obedience and toward truth is propounded in Scripture as essential Christianity, but nowhere does the Bible teach that mystical guidance must be the experience of the average believer. The arguments used virtually always make their case on the basis of the story sections and not the didactic sections. I have not been told by God in His Word that divine visitations of unusual nature constitute authentic Christianity. I have not been commanded to have them. But this lack of intimation and command does not logically rule out the possibility of receiving peculiar impulses from God.

2. Except in rare cases, the experience of Bible characters with mystical interventions of God’s guidance was not indicative of a normal way of life, and likely is recorded precisely because of its unusualness. It appears to the Bible reader that God is speaking directly more often than is actually so, due to the compressed nature of the Bible. Abraham had some direct discussions with God, but they were few and far between. Noah got his word from God and hammered away for many, many years without much

else being said. Paul was a man of many revelations (2 Cor. 11:1-10), yet this was a sign of his unique calling as a Bible author and forerunner and is nowhere given as a standard—rather, he is the notable exception among men. Just as the reality of miracles is abused by making it normative (“Expect a miracle every day!”), so the work of direct revelation is discredited by reducing it to the common. John the Baptist, remember, did no sign (John 10:41).

3. If God does impress us with directives outside of Scripture, we still have nothing sure. If God speaks to me, I need not rule it out. God may do that. He has done that in the past, and He can do what He wishes. But I am still without final assurance. I must *reason* with what I feel I am hearing.

How do I know that I have heard God directly? Illuminists have elaborate answers for this. They will say that He speaks in a still, small voice, but did He do that on Mt. Sinai? God speaks in a way that is not demanding, they will say. But does He always? They will say that they know it is of God by the unusual way in which it came. Or they will say that the impression is accompanied by certain feelings (peace, harmony, humility, love, etc.). But in the final analysis the illuminist has no way of knowing if what he has received is of God or not. The greatest heresies of modern religion were begun with similar private revelations.

In my own earlier experience of this sort I used to resort to saying, “I know that I know that I know.” That phrase was not original, but it expressed that I felt the only way to know if my supposed revelation was from God was that it was accompanied by its own assurance. It at least left people without argument against me. If I knew, then I knew. Upon further reflection, after many years in a measure of sincere illuminism, I came to realize that only about half of my impressions appeared to have some possible validity. In addition, I noticed that decisions made between illuminists

often were locked up by differing revelations, sometimes quite contrary! I could have guessed at least that well! I am not saying that God never spoke to me, but only that I could have no real assurance that I had heard Him speak. I could prove nothing. My experience of hearing God’s voice was not any more verifiable than that of the prominent faith healer who said God told him He would take his life if the people did not give a certain amount of money for his project. There is no essential difference. The illuminist *chooses* to believe that what he experienced is true, and this is all he can say.

A particular brand of illuminism has seemingly answered the problem of assurance by seeking the “word” from God through the actual Scripture text. By this method the Bible is read, sometimes consecutively, until the Spirit impresses a passage or phrase to the reader in such a way that it is said to be “given” to him. The reader may say, “This is what this means to me.” Often these verses are out of context or are interpreted in a way that is not known to anyone else but that individual. But did God author the Scripture for private interpretation? Chesterson said, and I am paraphrasing, “A person should be careful of reading his own Bible until he can read everyone else’s.” (I am embarrassed to say that I almost got married on this basis. In Jeremiah 31:22b I read, “The Lord will create a new thing on earth—a woman will surround a man....” And this is exactly what happened! I was serious, but my interpretation was entirely mystical and private.)

George Müller, the man who fed and clothed more than 10,000 orphans without asking for a penny from anyone but God, is often falsely cited as doing this. Being a student of Müller, I can say unreservedly that he did not.² In fact, he would have strongly refused to take any Scripture out of context. He is also noted for the stating of his *reasons* for particular actions in his journals. He was no mystic. Granted,

certain verses of Scripture were pointed out to him by the Holy Spirit, and God made them life-texts, but in every one of them the meaning was plain to anyone who read it. Consider the following quotes from Müller:

Impressions have neither one thing nor the other to do with faith. Faith has to do with the Word of God. It is not impressions, strong or weak, which will make the difference. We have to do with the Written Word and not ourselves or our impressions.³

Many people are willing to believe regarding those things that seem probable to them. Faith has nothing to do with probabilities. The province of faith begins where probabilities cease and sight and sense fail. Appearances are not to be taken into account. The question is whether God has spoken it in His Word.⁴

God guides, not by a visible sign, but by swaying the judgment. To wait before Him, weighing candidly in the scales every consideration for or against a proposed course, and in readiness to see which way the preponderance lies, is a frame of mind and heart in which one is fitted to be guided; and God touches the scales and makes the balance to sway as He will. But our hands must be off the scales, otherwise we need expect no interposition of His in our favor.⁵

We can say that all of the promises of God intended for believers are ours, without exception. Yet we should pray for faith to believe them. God, who gives differing measures of faith, may grant you the ability to trust Him on the basis of that promise to a greater degree than He does others. He may certainly emphasize a verse, but what we need is faith, not impressions about verses out of context. The Bible used this way is reduced to no more value in terms of guidance than a phone book or an advertisement on a billboard. The meaning is thrown out the window. Would the Holy Spirit promote a grab bag full of meanings for the Scriptures He

authored expressly for the purpose of being our infallible guide? So we find that this mysticism in the area of guidance casts doubt on the adequacy of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16). That is a lamentable end result from exercising ourselves in inner revelations.

During the fading stages of the Great Awakening, this kind of “enthusiasm” sprang up. That which had been unusual in its rare occurrence was now expected as normative. Benjamin Doolittle of Northfield, in his *An Inquiry Into Enthusiasm*,⁶ defined enthusiasm as “strong Fancy, Imagination or Conceit of having large Communications from or Participations with the Deity.” He said it produces the following in those who practice it:

(1) a contempt for all reason and argument, (2) faith without foundation, (3) blind obedience to impulses and “heated imaginations,” (4) great and sudden joy, (5) contempt of all not wholly in sympathy with their position, and (6) a spirit of persecution against all who differ, to the limit of their power; yet they will “bawl out Persecution, as loud as they can roar” if the “least Restraint” be put upon them.

Concerning these divine impulses Ebenezer Morton, a Middleborough layman, penned this poor quality poetry:

Whate'er Men speak by this New-Light
Still they are sure to be in the right:
'Tis a dark Lanthorn of a Spirit
Which none see by but those that bear it:
A Light that falls down from on high
For Spiritual Trades to cozen by:
And Ignis Fatuus that bewitches,
And leads Men into Pools and Ditches.⁷

Note again that real illuminists tend to have a distaste for reason altogether. Yet how can we describe wisdom apart from reason? Wisdom is a process of cognition, not a

bombshell out of the sky. In our nonthinking day it is quite popular to shortcut the painful process of reasoning for a blank waiting on some inner voice. It seems highly spiritual to do so and carries with it a magical authority. ("I got this from God at four o'clock in the morning!") In this way the most spiritually unkempt believer or the novice has equal voice with the wisest Christian veteran. It is also increasingly cultural. One wonders how much the desire to be mystical in the non-Christian world around us is akin to the evangelical mysticism in our own churches. Perhaps it is more a reaction to our information age by this generation who would far rather pack all of their information in a computer and forget the agony of thinking.

In all that I have said about this illuministic approach to guidance, I want to assert again that nothing is implied about the believer's motives being insincere. Nor have I said that God cannot send a divine impulse to the believer. Yet I am certainly saying that our lack of assurance as to its source casts us back on sanctified reasoning. God may use the sincere individual who gets his guidance the illuminist's way. He may bless him. He may honor his faith more than his method. I am quite sure that God *always* condescends to our imperfections. And if there is immaturity, we must realize that God will often use in our zealous immaturity what He disallows in our maturity. George Whitefield had such tendencies in his earlier days, saying, "I am a man of like passions with others, and consequently may have sometimes mistaken nature for grace, imagination for revelation."⁸ He put away his illuministic patterns as he grew in Christ, but he was used in those earlier days just as dramatically.

Christians should be very humble about this matter of hearing God's voice. We should say, "I believe that God is speaking to me in a special inner way about all of this, but I must test this out carefully by other means to know for

sure." Unfortunately there are schools of thought which do not allow for humility or tentativeness in this arena. They say that true faith is known by the bold declaration of the impression you have been given. Thus the one speaking runs the danger of declaring what God has not said, which was strictly prohibited in Deuteronomy 18:22. I find this a sad bondage. Some, I am sure, express themselves so forthrightly about their revelations to help convince themselves that what they *think* they heard is actually so. Nonetheless, it is not safe, especially as it concerns directives for others. Remember the car full of unclothed religious extremists picked up in a Southern town? Their leader supposedly had some very specific knowledge imparted to him from God to get in their vehicle and go, taking nothing with them at all. I distrust both their literalism and their illuminism! This illustration is a bit far removed from most of us, yet the basis for its credibility is no greater than anyone else who says he hears God. We are all sure that they were misguided, yet would they not be able to point to Isaiah for an example of naked obedience to revelation (Isa. 20:1-2)?

It is true, I must admit, that all situations do not lend themselves to contemplative reasoning. If one senses that God is impressing him about taking a certain fork of the road home rather than another, and there is no reason for it other than the "impulse," what should you do? If it involves no particular inconvenience, then you might take the road you are burdened to take. Yet do not act too sure of this being God's directive to you. If you are honest, you will have to say that such impulses often mean nothing at all. But if you can see that you were protected from some danger, or directed to some individual in distress, etc., then, after the fact, you can thank God for His leadership. Honesty will demand that you have no substantial proof that you were led by God until the data are in. And even then there is no assurance that the impulse was of God. Perhaps the thought you had was

inconsequential and providence must be given the credit. So, again, be humble about it. You haven't made a case for divine impulse as normative. I know of times in my earlier years when I felt God was telling me to drive to a certain house to witness to a man, and upon knocking at the door found that no one was there. The impulses were just as strong as others I had received, but they were proven to be false. Illuminists should be more honest with these things.

In addition to all I have said about the Word and sanctified reason playing the vital part in guidance, remember that the Christian's reasoning is unlike the world's (see 1 Cor. 2:6-8). I have often been seemingly impressed to speak to someone about Christ. Upon submitting that thought to sanctified reason I am often still compelled to do so. To the nonbeliever, speaking to a stranger in the airport about Christ may seem irrational; but to the believer, who works with wisdom from better premises, the action is entirely reasonable. We are to be compassionate about the state of others and we are to be bold and ready to witness for Christ. So we are biblically rational (not rationalistic) in the right set of concepts.

One additional observation might be helpful. At times what is perceived as being some rather direct impression of God is really nothing else than the store of accumulative knowledge of Scripture coming to bear on your thinking. Without being able to fully express just why you believe you should take a course of action, you are being led by years of Bible knowledge converging on the subject. You understand the "ways of God." Moses certainly had exceptional revelatory experiences beyond even the prophets (see Num. 12:6-8), but he also knew the ways of God ("He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the people of Israel" [Ps. 103:7]). This is normative leadership of the Holy Spirit who "will remind you of everything I have said" (John 14:26b).

What leaves me with a most chilling effect is the possibility for grand delusions if sanctified reasoning is not given its proper place. We already see a large movement toward the supernatural in our society. New Age mysticism is now commonly accepted in the media and takes a variety of forms. But almost always voices are heard. Help is given by spirit guides through mediums of various kinds. If our own church people are brought to a phenomenalistic base rather than a truth base, what will be the outcome? And what essential difference is there between these voices?

The Normative Approach

We must live in the spirit of prayer to be guided believers in these nonmoral areas. There is no gain to operating off of natural unassisted reason, but every hope for wisdom if one relies on the Holy Spirit to supply it. God is inclined to the life of faith. God wants it to be said that He supplied the wisdom. And therefore we must ask.

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask of God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does (James 1:5-8).

It was again George Müller who said that nine-tenths of knowing God's will has to do with "having no will of our own." A concerted effort to rid ourselves of fleshly desires as it relates to our decision is foundational. Then, after and during the prayer, another look at the will must be taken. God has said that He "works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose" (Phil. 2:12-13). Weighing in all the normal helps (good counsel, circumstances, godly priorities, any parameters of Scripture, knowledge of the

“ways” of God, etc.), the believer is left with a way of thinking about the issue at hand. If he is perfectly willing to do *anything*, what does his sanctified will *now* desire? This warmth toward certain holy desires, with patient waiting before God in prayer, is no less the work of the Spirit than the most dramatic “immediate impulse” others may claim. This is wisdom. The man who makes the wise decision, yet always remains open to God’s further intervention in whatever way God pleases, is demonstrating normative spiritual guidance.

J. I. Packer provides summary insight with this concluding quote:

God’s guidance is more like the marriage guidance, child guidance, or career guidance that is received from counselors than it is like being “talked down” by the airport controller as one flies blind through the clouds. Seeking God’s guidance is not like practicing divination or consulting oracles, astrologers, and clairvoyants for information about the future, but rather is comparable with everyday thinking through of alternative options in given situations to determine the best course open to us. The inward experience of being divinely guided is not ordinarily one of seeing signs or hearing voices, but rather one of being enabled to work out the best thing to do.⁹

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End Notes

- 1 R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford, 1959) 413-14.
- 2 See *George Müller of Bristol*, Arthur Pierson (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell) for a list of verses used by Müller, 377-85.
- 3 Miles Stanford, *Principles of Spiritual Growth*, 8.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 A. T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol*, 185-86.
- 6 Published in Boston, 1743. Doolittle (1695-1749), (see Dexter, *Graduates of Yale, I*, 151-54), as found in Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England*, Harper, 1957, 78.
- 7 On the title page of his *More Last Words to these Churches* (Boston, 1746), as found in Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (Harper, 1957), 77-78.
- 8 R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford, 1959), 450.
- 9 J. I. Packer, *Hot Tub Religion* (Tyndale, 1987), 117-18.