

Some Concerns About a Revivalist's View of "How to Hear from God"

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The Revivalist's Message

Recently we had an entertaining and winsome "revivalist" visit University Baptist Church and preach in anticipation of several revival meetings he was to conduct for our church. On Sunday, February 20, 2005, this revivalist preached a sermon titled "How to Hear from God" in the Sunday night service. The sermon covered the issues of: 1. How Does God Speak?; 2. How Do We Get God to Speak to Us?; 3. Why Do We Miss God?; and 4. Results of Missing God.

Of special concern to me was the issue within the sermon "How Does God Speak?" The revivalist taught that there were four converging indicators (my term, not his) for hearing from God. He said that (1) God speaks through His Word, (2) God speaks through your spirit, (3) God speaks through authorities, and (4) God speaks through circumstances. These elements, with variations, are fairly widely held among Christians and widely taught by Christian leaders.¹ It is not my intention in this paper to fully take on the issue of knowing God's will.² I do, however,

¹ A quick look at my own library yielded these examples. Perhaps the most read resource on this topic, at least among Southern Baptists, is Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994). The table of contents contains entries such as "God Speaks Through the Bible," "God Speaks Through Prayer," "God Speaks Through Circumstances," and "God Speak Through the Church." The one-time President of Moody Bible Institute, George Sweeting, in his *How to Discover the Will of God* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975) lists several ways in which God reveals His will, including the Bible, prayer, the work of the Holy Spirit, and normal circumstances. Marion H. Nelson, in his *How to Know God's Will* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963) teaches that God makes His will known through the Word of God, through control of one's thought life (both direct and indirect) and through control of circumstance. He further gives "signposts" in determining God's will which include the Bible, the conscience, advice of your pastor and Christian friends, common sense, circumstances, the peace of God, and the results. Examples such as these redound throughout Christian literature.

² In my judgment, the single best treatment of the subject is Garry Friesen (with J. Robin Maxson), *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980, revised 2004). In this book, Friesen and Maxson argue that the traditional view, i.e., the view I am criticizing in this paper, is not taught in the Bible. First, they set forth the traditional view, trying to give it its best case biblically. Next, they critique the traditional view to show that it is not taught in the Bible. Third, they set forth what they consider the Bible does teach regarding the will of God and how decisions should be made. Last, they apply their model, which they call the way of wisdom, to a number of specific areas of decisions, including marriage, ministry, missions, vocation, giving and areas over which Christians differ.

want to focus on one particular aspect that has caused me great concern, viz., the implication this present view of knowing God's will has for the doctrine of the sufficiency and perspicuity of the Bible.

My concern for what the revivalist taught and the implications of this teaching on one's understanding of the Bible was piqued when he asked the congregation how many of these four indicators were necessary in order to step out on faith. Someone in the congregation suggested that the Word alone was sufficient. In response the revivalist said that people can make the Bible say just about anything they want and gave as an example the joke that the Bible says "Judas went out and hanged himself. ... Go thou and do likewise." Thus, we were supposed to conclude that the Bible alone was not sufficient to hear from God. He went on to teach that all four indicators were needed together. When all four agreed, then one was hearing from God.

My Concerns

I should like to make several comments on his view. First, I take issue with the notion that people can make the Bible say whatever they want it to say. Perhaps one will accuse me of splitting hairs here, but strictly speaking it is not possible to make the Bible mean anything other than what it actually does mean. While it is possible for one to misunderstand the meaning of the Bible in a given instance, but this does not constitute making the Bible say what one wants it to say. Rather, it is an instance of one attributing to the Bible something that it does not say. The subtle distinction I am going for here is that there is a crucial difference between maintaining that one is making the Bible say something and one mistakenly attributing to the Bible something that it does not say. It is necessary to preserve the notion that it is entirely possible (for the most part) for a Christian to know with certainty what the Bible actually says and for the Christian to know when someone is mistakenly attributing to the Bible something it does not say. Now, I am

not suggesting that this is always easy. But, unless we maintain in principle the notion that the Bible is understandable, we are in danger of nullifying the reality that God has spoken to us. This is so because there is, in the final analysis, no practical difference between, on the one hand, saying that God has spoken through His word but we cannot with confidence know what He has said and, on the other hand, saying that God has not spoken at all.

Second, granting for the sake of argument that people could make the Bible say anything they want it to, one must ask the revivalist if he thinks it is possible for people to make any of the other indicators say anything they want them to as well. Can one make his spirit say whatever he wants it to (or to put it more precisely, can one misunderstand his own spirit) and likewise authorities and circumstances? I cannot see how the revivalist could deny this. Since this is so, then it is certainly possible for people to make all four indicators simultaneously say what they want them to say, thus rendering the group as a whole no more adequate for hearing from God than the Bible alone was. I have heard numerous testimonies of people making decisions that clearly are in violation of what God would want and yet the decision was the normal outworking of someone reading the agreement of these indicators as God speaking. (I am thinking here of certain heresies that are disseminated by teachers of aberrant theology on Christian television.) To allow for the possibility of misunderstanding any one of these four indicators is to allow for the possibility of misunderstanding all four of these indicators. Compounding misunderstanding brings one no closer to "hearing from God."

Third, if one reads the Bible to be commanding something, yet one's authorities (or another indicator) do not concur, is one supposed to postpone obeying the Bible until there is a consensus among all the indicators? This is exactly what the revivalist taught with the example of paying off his debt by taking out a second mortgage. He had concluded that the Bible

commanded him to pay off his debt and yet was not willing to go through with his plans to take out the second mortgage until his wife (his authority) agreed. This is certainly problematic. I submit that it was a mistake in the first place to think that it was God's will that the Bible commanded him to pay of his debt by taking out a second mortgage. While it might be true that the Bible commands one to pay off one's dept, to say that this has to be done by taking out a second mortgage is a judgment of *how* this can be done. The taking out of a second mortgage is itself not commanded by Scripture. But the revivalist might respond that this is exactly the point he was trying to make by the example. Seemingly he would have us conclude that, though it was God's will to pay off the dept, it was not God's will to do so by means of taking out the second mortgage since his wife was not on board with that plan of action. Thus, it seems like I am making the revivalist's point for him. The fact is that I am not. The problem here is that taking out a second mortgage had nothing to do with God's will in the first place, regardless of whether his wife agreed or not. There is nothing in the Bible about second mortgages. Even if he was correct in his application of the command to "owe no man anything," to conclude that this entailed taking out a second mortgage was an *inference from* the command. But the inference itself is not part of the teaching of the Bible. So, whether or not to take out mortgages has nothing to do with God's will at all. There was no need to see if the other indicators aligned with this plan of action in order to decide that it was God's will. Rather, the other indicators are perhaps relevant to the *wisdom* of taking a certain plan of action. In this I have no problem. In fact, I think this is more in keeping with what the Bible would teach. It is just that it is a mistake to construe the situation as being an example of "hearing from God." It is instead an example of one bringing to bear a number of factors relevant in weighing the wisdom of taking a particular course of action.

With all this one might again conclude that I am merely splitting hairs. But I do not think that I am. What is at stake is the notion of how perspicuous and sufficient we think the Bible is for the Christian life. If we are led to believe that one can "make the Bible say anything he wants" then this is to say that the Bible is not something that we as Christians can be confident in understanding. If one can "make the Bible say anything he wants" then who are we to suggest that we know what the Bible is saying in any particular instance? Further, if we are led to believe that we need other indicators to "hear from God" then this is to say that the Bible alone is not sufficient for my practical Christian life. This is tantamount to saying that the Bible alone is not the Word of God. Now I do not believe that the revivalist meant to imply that there was more to the Word of God than the Bible. I do maintain, however, that this is the logical implication of what he and others are teaching about the will of God.

My Views

In contrast to all this, I should like to briefly sketch out the specifics of my own views in this matter. Broadly speaking there are two categories of revelation from God. These have come to be known in theology as *General Revelation* and *Special Revelation*. General Revelation is God's revelation of Himself through creation. Creation speaks of the existence of God, certain attributes of God, and the general moral law of God. (Romans 1 and 2) General Revelation is universal, which is to say that it is given to all people and can be known and understood by virtue of our being intelligent creatures. Special Revelation is God revealing Himself specifically through His Prophets and Apostles and ultimately through His incarnation in Jesus Christ. (Heb. 1:1-2) Special Revelation reveals truths about God and His plans that cannot be known through General Revelation, including truths such as the Trinity, the Gospel, and the specific moral law of God. It is known and understood for the most part by people by virtue of being redeemed.

Jesus Christ is the living Word of God. The Bible is the written Word of God. The Bible constitutes this Special Revelation of God in written form. As such, it alone is the Word of God in as much as it is by it alone that we "hear from God" in the relevant sense of that phrase. God does not speak through our spirit, our authorities, our circumstances or anything else. God only "speaks" through His Word, and only the Bible is His Word. To be sure, God, through the Holy Spirit, quickens His Word to us as we seek to live our lives in devotion to Him. This is why it is so important to know and understand the Bible.³

To be sure, knowing and understanding the Bible is not always an easy task. While the fundamentals of the Christian life, such as the Gospel, can be embraced by a child, the deeper things of God require a maturity and understanding that come only with great effort. (Prov. 1:5-6; 1 Cor. 2:6, 14:20; Acts 20:27) It requires careful attention to the original languages of the Bible, the historical background and context, and the proper principles of biblical hermeneutics. While this endeavor is not always easy, it is always rewarding. One may wonder why some things of the Bible are indeed hard to understand. I should like to suggest the reason (which is not original with me). An understanding of the deeper things of God comes only with great effort either on our own part or the part of someone else. It is as though the truths of the Bible yield themselves only after much struggle and wrestling with the text. Yet it is in this very struggle

³ One particular verse deserves mentioning in this context since it is often quoted when discussing God communicating to us outside the Bible. Rom. 8:16 says "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God," This verse is often mistakenly taken to refer to a subjective experience from the Spirit whereby He bears witness *to* our spirits, confirming to us that we are God's children (and perhaps confirming unto us other things as well). However, the verse actually says that God's Spirit bears witness *with* (συμμαρτυρεῖ, from συμμαρτυρέω, I testify or bear witness with) our spirits; not *to* our spirits. It is the difference between me singing a song *to* someone and me singing a song *with* someone. With the former, I sing the song and the other does not. With the latter, we both sing the song. The verse is saying that our spirit bears witness that we are the children of God and God's Spirit bears witness that we are the children of God. This notion of both bearing witness is undoubtedly against the backdrop of the Mosaic Law's requirement that "... by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established." (Deut. 19:15) Cf. also Matt. 18:16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established'" and 2 Corinthians 13:1 "This *will be* the third *time* I am coming to you. 'By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.'"

that God changes us. It is in laboring intensely over God's word that it gives up its truths and in that very exercise the Word of God changes us from within. I fear, however, that the daunting task of carefully attending one's self to the proper methods of understanding the Bible has led many to substitute an easier method of trying to read certain indicators such as one's own spirit, authorities, and circumstances. But such indicators should never displace the real Word of God. It behooves us, therefore, to develop the skills necessary to delve deeper into the things of God by learning those things necessary to unwrap the riddles in order to understand His Word.