

Issues in Charismatic Theology

God's Will

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1. Introduction

It may be surprising to see the topic of God's will as a class in a series about the Charismatic Movement. It is not typically pointed to as an area of disagreement. However, this is because a majority of non-Charismatic believers have embraced a similar approach to discerning God's will for their lives.

At essence is the issue of how we make choices and what revelation we use in the process of choosing. Should we expect divine direction regarding our life circumstances? How has God communicated to us regarding our decision-making?

2. Public Revelation

Prophecy is the revelation of God intended for those beyond the recipient of the revelation. Since Charismatics believe in the practice of modern day prophecy, they have no question about expecting God's specific direction when they encounter decisions to be made. One way they look for revelation is from those who profess to have the gift of prophecy.

This is allegedly God's revelation and when spoken about a subject related to a decision the belief exists that God is communicating through such prophecy about the pending decision.

3. Private Revelation

Private revelation is the direct revelation of God to a specific individual. It is the revelation that undergirds prophecy (or public revelation). In order for a prophet to speak from God the knowledge of what to say is necessary. This information is private revelation, or direct revelation from God. It is what is meant by the spiritual gift of knowledge in 1 Corinthians 12:8, 13:2 and 13:8.

When the direct revelation is intended only for the use of the individual receiving the revelation, it is considered private revelation. Most who believe in private revelation would never consider speaking to another prophetically. They may not even understand their sense of God's communication to them as revelation. This is why other words for such information from God are used, such as "leading."

In Charismatic theology there is a distinction typically made between the written word of God and words of God not written in the Bible. This is often called “rhema” after a Greek term for “word.” The belief is that this is revelatory communication from God that is specific to individuals, unlike “logos” which is said to be the Greek term for “word” that is general in nature. In other words, the written word of God is applied personally to our life circumstances by the spoken (in some sense) word of God in the Holy Spirit.

Bill Hamon has written, "God sometimes reveals His Will by a rhema from 'out of the clear blue.' But at other times we receive it by an illumination of a particular Scripture. As we read God sends a quickening rhema that says, 'This applies to you.' ...This type of divine directive may also be called 'revelation knowledge' or 'Scriptural illumination.'

This distinction between “rhema” and “logos” is artificial since both mean “word.” They are both used to translate the same Hebrew word in the Old Testament. There is no basis for this written/spoken dichotomy. This concept is built upon the pre-understanding that God is communicating through private revelation today.

Private revelation, like public revelation, results from the revelational gift of knowledge (1 Corinthians 12:8; 13:8-9). God imparts direct revelation (knowledge) to man, which is either intended for the individual alone (private revelation) or for others as well (prophecy or public revelation). Several examples of private revelation in the Bible include Joseph (Matthew 2:13-14, 19-21), Philip (Acts 8:26), Ananias (Acts 9:10-16), Peter (Acts 12:7-10) and Paul (Acts 16:6-10).

Revelation, public and private, should be understood as distinct from illumination. Illumination is the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit which shows man what has already been revealed by God. Illumination, therefore, does not involve the new disclosure of truth to man while revelation does. Illumination helps us to see the significance of what has already been revealed in our own lives.

4. The cessation of public and private revelation

The Old and New Testaments are the prophecies of God (cf. 2 Peter 1:20-21) which have been recorded for us to live by today. In fact, the Bible is the public revelation that God has provided for us presently. While God is able to give additional revelation today and while we know that God will reveal much more when Christ returns in the future, we have seen in prior classes in this series that God has currently chosen not to do so.

Second, private revelation by God is commonly claimed by Christians today, whether they realize the significance of their words or not. Phrases such as “God told me,” “I was given a word from God,” “God called me to go to ...,” “God called me as a ...,” “God is leading me to do...” are at best misleading (if they refer to the Scripture) and are more likely confused.

There are many major problems with seeking God's will through private revelation. First and foremost is that seeking God's will in private revelation is not biblical, as we have seen in the earlier class on Cessationism vs. Continuationism from this series.

1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches that such "knowledge will be done away." The timing of the end of God's revelation (knowledge) is when the completion of the New Testament and the conclusion of the apostolic era (1 Corinthians 13:9-10). This applies to private revelation as well as public revelation. Since God's revelation in the Scripture has been completed, we must look to what God has already communicated to guide our wise decision making.

Also, the Bible says it is inspired by God to make us adequate and equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16). Through God's word, accurately interpreted and applied, we have an ample supply of guidance for all of life issues. This is sufficient revelation to practice the will of God without any additional words from the Lord.

Furthermore, The Bible shows that our decisions which are within God's moral commands are left to our choice. Examples include:

- 1 Corinthians 7:39: "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes [*personal choice*], only in the Lord [*moral command*]."
- 2 Corinthians 10:27: "If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go [*personal choice*], eat anything [*moral command*] that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience sake."
- 2 Corinthians 9:7: "Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart [*personal choice*]; not grudgingly or under compulsion [*moral command*], for God loves a cheerful giver."

In each of these three examples from Paul's letters to the Corinthians, it is clear that they give the command which is God's will and all the personal choices are made through the application of biblical principles. This shows how we practice incorporating our faithfulness to the commands of the Lord with the opportunity for personal choices that God has afforded us to make.

The biblical examples of private revelation are from the period of God's special revelation to man. It should not surprise us that God gave private revelation during this time, particularly since the time when "knowledge will be done away" awaited the passing of the apostles. Since God is no longer giving special, normative revelation to the church, it follows that He is also no longer giving private, personal revelation to individual Christians.

Seeking God's will in private revelation is unnecessary. 2 Peter 1:3 teaches that we have everything we need to live a godly life. We have the Scripture which the Holy Spirit uses to guide us. There is therefore no need for us to ask God to tell us anymore than what He has already revealed. The Bible is sufficient for our faith and the daily practice of our faith. To seek for private revelation is to say the Bible is not a sufficient guide for the practice of our faith.

Seeking God's will in private revelation is dangerous. You may assign God's reputation to a promise that He has never made. This may result in damage to God's credibility. If we wrongly think God promised something and it does not come to pass, how can we have confidence in what God has truly promised? How do we know whether the inner prompting is from God or not?

In addition, it is a slippery slope toward false prophecy. One day God is making a personal promise or command to you, the next day God is making a corporate promise or command through you. In essence, there is no difference between believing that God confirmed to you ahead of time that you should take a certain job and Oral Roberts believing that God confirmed to him that he would die unless he was given \$8 million.

Furthermore, seeking God's will in private revelation is the origin of cults. Cults start with alleged private revelation from God. Cults typically have two things in common: a claim of direct revelation from God and a supreme authority figure. Christians often incorporate both of these dangerously.

Also, seeking God's will in private revelation reduces to the absurd. For example, do we need private revelation for our choice of food and clothes? Should we seek private revelation to determine what God thinks are the things for which we ought to be seeking private revelation?

Seeking God's will in private revelation inappropriately limits our God-given human freedom and individuality. God wants us to grow in wisdom as we learn to apply His principles to life. God causes spiritual growth through our personal decision making. Seeking private revelation serves to move the responsibility for decision making from ourselves to God. This stunts our growth. Also, if we later believe we made the "wrong" decision we may be tempted to blame God for what was our responsibility.

Seeking God's will in private revelation is wrong, even if the supposed promise comes true! Whether a certain result occurs does not necessarily mean that the private revelation was from God. We can never determine truth by results. For example, Jeremiah had very poor results and some cults have a lot of results.

We cannot expect God to give us specific, special, private revelation concerning decisions we are facing. Looking for such extraordinary guidance will result in disappointment and frustration with God, or assigning God's reputation to a revelation that He has not made.

5. The misunderstanding of faith

There becomes a sense that what we believe the Lord is leading us to ought to be acted upon as an issue of faith. As such we treat our faith in what God has truly revealed as His will and what we think God will do based upon our perceptions of His will as the same. The result is Christians acting in faith according to what they hope will happen rather than what God has promised. Biblical faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1) in accordance with His truth.

One example of this is with the missionary support concept of “faith promise giving” where a person is instructed to prayerfully consider what God would have them to give to a missionary endeavor. This became popularized as it proved to be an effective fundraising tool. People are encouraged to promise to give even if they are unsure of how God will provide the money. This is built upon more than sacrificial giving but the sense that God will reveal to you what your sacrifice ought to be and can be trusted to enable you to fulfill your commitment. Hence the term “faith promise” where we are to exercise faith in God based upon these decisions. This approach leads people to put God to the test (Matthew 4:7).

Any exhortation to trust God for a specific earthly outcome that God has not truly revealed His intent to bring about is misguided. This is not true faith but presumption in disguise.

6. The providential guidance of God

While God’s will is not knowable beyond God’s direct revelation in the Scripture, God’s guidance is nevertheless assured if we trust in the Lord (Proverbs 3:5-6). But how does this guidance occur?

God has prepared good works for us beforehand and will guide us into these providentially (Ephesians 2:10). These are works that we ought to do and God’s grace saved us for this purpose (Ephesians 2:8-9). As this was His doing and not ours, we can have confidence that He will guide us toward those good works.

God is able to guide us in spite of our plans (Proverbs 16:9). We cannot make our plans with any assurance (James 4:13-17). The Bible often depicts God moving His people in ways that they did not intend in order to guide them into His plans.

God causes all things to providentially work out for good for those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Our responsibility to love God supersedes all specific decisions that we consider so significant. He has promised to work things out for good; He has not promised to reveal to us the means by which He will do that in advance. Much of God’s faithfulness to us may never be known in this life.

In areas where the Bible does not give specific direction, God guides us in decision-making through providing wisdom, not private revelation. God wants us to ask Him for wisdom in responding to our circumstances (James 1:5). God imparts wisdom to us through the Word of God (Deuteronomy 6:4, Psalm 119:98), though the wise counsel of others (Proverbs 1:5; 13:20) and through our life experiences (Hebrews 5:12-14), through our personal research (Luke 14:28-32).

God guides us in prayer only in the sense that in communicating with Him we become sensitive to the revelation that is in the Scripture. For example, you have a harder time hating someone when you are praying for them. Prayer does not bring new revelation; in prayer, we speak to God, He does not speak to us.

The role of the Holy Spirit in God's guidance can be understood as follows: The Holy Spirit wrote the Bible, which illuminates the minds and hearts of the hearer toward obedience. The Holy Spirit does not do an end run around the Bible but uses the Word to guide us.

We are morally bound to follow the commands of Scripture and Ephesians 5:17 commands us not to be foolish but to understand the will of the Lord. Anytime we make foolish decisions we are acting outside of the will of the Lord. If we understand our choices to be foolish and rebel against God anyway, we do more than suffer natural negative consequences, we damage our relationship with God Himself.

7. Conclusion

We avoid being foolish and understand the will of God (Ephesians 5:17) by studying what God has communicated to us in the Scripture! In the Bible, God not only lays out a moral code of right and wrong, but He imparts His value system to us. Through the Scripture we can understand what is important to God and therefore what should be important to us. As we humbly examine, understand and yield ourselves to God's truth, we will not only be guided toward wisdom but more importantly, we will grow toward spiritual maturity.