

# **DOES GOD GIVE SUBJECTIVE REVELATION TODAY? THE PLACE OF MYSTICISM IN CHRISTIAN DECISION MAKING**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

During my 30 years of ministry in the Mormon (LDS) culture, I have observed that LDS people rely on emotions to confirm their beliefs. Mormon missionaries frequently refer to Moroni 10:4 which encourages people to “ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.” That has been done by millions of people who are now fully convinced of the truth of Mormonism. Virtually nothing will change their thinking and perspective, not even proven forged documents of Mark Hoffman or DNA proof that American Indians did not descend from Hebrew immigrants, as the *Book of Mormon* attests. This is because most Mormons place their experience above Scripture or logic when confronted with facts.

Many Evangelical Christians, perhaps unknowingly, do much the same thing. This is no more obvious than in the area of guidance for life’s decisions. We often hear phrases such as, “I *feel* like this is what God would have me do” or “I *sense* that the Holy Spirit is leading me there.” That is fine if things work out as they desire, but what happens when things go sour? It is possible for them to become disappointed and disillusioned with God. My own experience in going to Utah, even though I was raised there, is a case in point. During my seminary days at Dallas Theological Seminary, my wife and I enjoyed a well-received ministry at a church in Fort Worth. Following graduation we moved back to Utah, because I was certain God was *leading* me in that direction. Ministry in Utah was slow, difficult, discouraging, and often lacked results. After several years I began to wonder if God (or I) had made a

mistake. I reasoned that if God had led me to Utah, surely I would enjoy some level of His blessing through effectiveness in ministry.

About that time I read the book *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Garry Friesen.<sup>1</sup> My spiritual liberation came when I realized that I was in Utah because I had chosen to be there, and that I had not missed God's "perfect will" for my life. I could serve God in any location I chose and still be in His will as long as I remained faithful to God and maintained a lifestyle of godliness. For a time I had allowed emotional subjectivity to dominate my thinking, causing me to question if I had missed the "dot," which Friesen defines as "an ideal plan [of God] for each individual,"<sup>2</sup> or "the center of God's will that must be discovered by the decision maker."<sup>3</sup> Following the publication of Friesen's book, Evangelical Christians aligned themselves on the side of either the traditional approach that God's will for one's life must be found, or this radically new approach—the way of wisdom. Those who defend the traditional approach do not realize that they are opening a Pandora's Box of subjective mysticism in Christian experience.

On the other hand, can believers trust their intellect, apart from feelings, regarding courses of action they desire to take? Human reasoning and logic can also mislead us. Since all humans are created by God with intellectual and emotional capabilities, and because our present sinful condition can contaminate our motives, is there a need for current revelation from God for individuals? Must there be a *fresh* word from God or an experience of being "called" so one may be certain they are following God's chosen path for them? Many Christians claim to be "in God's will" due to their supposed "call" to Christian service, a point which this article addresses later.

All of this raises a very important question: Does God speak today to individuals (who have the Scriptures available to them) through feelings, impressions, or brain flashes? If the answer to that question is yes, does this allow the door of present-day revelation from God to remain ajar, not only for Evangelical Christianity but for Mormonism as well? (The situation is further compounded by the possibility that extra-biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Garry Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Portland: Multnomah, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

revelation from God may only be available to a privileged few.)\* If God does not speak extra-biblically today, then one would have to agree that the Scriptures are our sole and sufficient source and guide. Perhaps a new look at this situation is needed.

## II. THE PHENOMENON OF SUBJECTIVE REVELATION

### A. MORMONS RELY HEAVILY ON SUBJECTIVE REVELATIONS

My thinking on this subject was rekindled in the summer of 2003 when Jon Krakauer's latest book was published: *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith*.<sup>4</sup> It traces the thread of polygamy in Mormonism from its founder, Joseph Smith, to the present day. Of special interest to me was the place of on-going revelation among those who are called *fundamentalist Mormons*. They defend all past and present polygamy practices by what they perceive as a current word from God.

The practice of polygamy was one of the primary tenets of early Mormonism and was a major reason for conflict between Mormon settlers of the 1800s and the US government. It was rigidly defended and liberally practiced by major Mormon leaders, despite objections from many constituents. In 1890, Wilford Woodruff, the fourth Mormon prophet/president, prompted by his desire that Utah be accepted into statehood, received a "revelation" from God to discontinue the practice of polygamy.<sup>5</sup> This was made public in what is often called the *Mormon Manifesto*. Privately however, some leaders continued to promote and practice polygamy. This Achilles heel of Mormonism has also caused feuds between modern day sects of fundamentalist Mormons, resulting in numerous assassinations within and between clans.

Ron and Dan Lafferty, raised in a solid LDS family, were exposed to some early documents of Mormonism and became convinced of the truth of polygamy. They began to promote plural marriage, and Dan took a

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\* Editor's note: Both in the OT and the NT special revelation was exceedingly rare. Typically only a handful of people in each generation received special revelation

<sup>4</sup> Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Random, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *The Mormon Murders* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988).

second wife. When they received resistance from family members and their bishop,<sup>†</sup> they became convinced that God gave them a revelation to eliminate those individuals. On July 24, 1984 the homicides were carried out. Not only did they kill their youngest brother's wife, Brenda Lafferty, but they also killed her 15-month-old daughter, Erica as well. The bishop escaped because he was not at home. Ron and Dan were convicted. Dan is serving two life sentences, and Ron was sentenced to death. Later, his conviction was thrown out and he was retried in 1996, but was again sentenced to death. Currently Ron is seeking new counsel to handle the appeals of his death penalty conviction. Dan admits he did the killings but has never admitted wrongdoing because he says, "I was guided by the hand of God."<sup>6</sup>

The highly publicized abduction of Elizabeth Smart during the summer of 2002 is another illustration of a deeply religious person carrying out God's present-day revelation to him. Brian David Mitchell, a fundamentalist Mormon, received a revelation from God that he should have seven wives. He kidnapped Elizabeth from her bedroom and kept her as a wife for nine months. The mainline LDS church in Salt Lake City today denies any connection with these activities, yet the reality is that these atrocities reflect the church's original roots.

Both of these illustrations, while violating the laws of the land, were done by those claiming a revelation from God and their obedience to it. Despite the civil consequences, they were compelled by what they considered a higher law.

Another factor that figures into this scenario is what is commonly referred to as the *burning feeling* or the *burning in the bosom*. For LDS people this is a very special sensation. Some are not willing to discuss it with those outside their faith system. The first mention of this phenomenon was in a revelation Joseph Smith gave to Oliver Cowdery in April of 1829. Cowdery wanted to speed things up with regard to the dictation he was receiving from Smith, so Smith "dictated" this revelation from God: "But behold I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore you shall feel that it is right"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>†</sup> Bishop Richard Stowe played a role in Ron Lafferty being excommunicated from the mainstream LDS church

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 318.

<sup>7</sup> *Doctrine and Covenants*, Section 9, Verse 8.

Since that time this physical sensation has become a standard by which Mormons substantiate the Book of Mormon as a true book from God. An actual description of this feeling is difficult to pin down, as it would likely differ for each person. Nonetheless, once the sensation is experienced, little can be done to convince people that it may not have come from God.

Putting these two concepts together—revelation from God in the present time and the emotional sensation that LDS people experience—both the mainline Mormon and the fundamentalist Mormon can claim to receive personal direction from God for individual situations.

#### B. MANY NON-CHARISMATIC EVANGELICALS ALSO RELY ON SUBJECTIVE REVELATIONS

With this background information it is not difficult to see a parallel in the practice of many well-meaning Christian people today. Even non-charismatic cessationist Evangelicals rely on subjective-mystical revelation from God. I have personally encountered many such situations. Years ago a well known Bible teacher decided God was directing him to change ministries. I was shocked because this individual had a very unique and much needed ministry. When I asked him why he was changing his focus, without hesitation he said, “God told me to.” I further inquired and he told me he had personally heard the voice of God speak to him. This individual was a Dallas Theological Seminary grad who did not have a charismatic cell in his body, yet the voice of God for him was the deciding factor. How many times has this story been repeated when people change ministries? Do these situations always prove to be from God? Consider also, does this make a person vulnerable to listen to other “voices,” which may ultimately damage or destroy his ministry?

We have all heard a pastor tell his congregation that he is waiting on God regarding the next series of sermons to preach. This indicates that he expects some sort of new word from God or feelings-centered brain flash from God before he can minister. Other pastors say that God told them to build a bigger building, or create a new ministry program. The implication is that if the congregation does not follow the pastor’s lead in this area, they are disobeying God.

In a November 2003 *Christianity Today* article entitled, “Mr. Jabez Goes to Africa,” the author relates how the founder of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries, Bruce Wilkinson, had a “burning bush” experience at a

Wendy's restaurant while reading a biography of Hudson Taylor.<sup>8</sup> Wilkinson was stunned when he realized that he may have just had a conversation with God, in which he asked, "God, tell me what do you want me to do," and he sensed God's reply: "*I want you to keep the Great Commission.*"<sup>9</sup> Was this a real dialogue with God, a series of providential events directed by God, or an overactive imagination? Perhaps Bruce was bored with his present ministry and wanted an honorable way out—who can object when the source is God? Wilkinson's conservative evangelical approach to Bible teaching hardly puts him in the arena of the charismatic community, so this raises questions that often plague us: *Could this kind of thing happen to me? Does this happen only to "superstar" Christians? Why didn't God respond to me when I asked that question? Was I listening? Am I unworthy?* The questions are perplexing, not only for Christian workers but the general Christian public as well.

The problem of subjective leading and mysticism in Christian living is not a recent phenomenon. In his book, *Balancing the Christian Life*, published over 30 years ago, Charles Ryrie made reference to a mystical approach to understanding the Bible, calling it an "affliction."<sup>10</sup> Anyone familiar with Christian books and literature has doubtless become increasingly perplexed with every passing year at the explosion of information and themes about God speaking to individuals today, either directly or indirectly.

More often than not, many of these experiences indicate little interaction with the revealed Word of God, the Bible. The "listening prayer" fad is one case in point. As much as 15 years ago, David Pitches's book entitled *Does God Speak Today?* gave 47 cases of modern-day communication from God, apart from Scripture, which had good results.<sup>11</sup> The author also included 15 examples of counterfeit revelations and concluded that experiences must be tested. In a recent book entitled, *How to Hear From God: Learn to Know His Voice and Make Right Decisions*, the author, Joyce Meyer says, "God delivers His word through signs, revelations, and internal confirmation. Ask God for the sensitivity to hear

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy C. Morgan, "Mr. Jabez Goes to Africa," *Christianity Today*, November 2003.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> David Pitches, *Does God Speak Today?* (Bloomington: Bethany House, 1990).

His voice.”<sup>12</sup> Even Henry Blackaby, who calls Christians to dependence on God’s Word, also teaches, “No amount of reasoning and intellectualizing will discover [God’s will]. God himself must reveal it. God’s Holy Spirit reveals his will to those who are seeking his mind and his heart.”<sup>13</sup> He adds that Christian leaders can grow unfamiliar with God’s voice and miss His guidance.<sup>14</sup> Is Blackaby merely using Christian jargon, or does he contradict himself?

No longer does doctrine govern and interpret experience, but rather, application and experience control interpretation. Meanings are assigned by the reader of Scripture, rather than by the writer, and multiple meanings are given to a single passage. *What does it mean to me?* has become the operative interpretive question, rather than *What did the author intend his readers to know or do?* Realizing that the entire area of hermeneutics is facing a crisis and that pre-understanding is now the rule, along with a growing intolerance for the common-sense grammatical-historical approach to understanding biblical truth, we now proceed to point out some positive aspects of cognitive—as opposed to emotional—approaches to this topic.

### III. BIBLICAL INSIGHTS REGARDING THESE PRACTICES

#### A. EXAMPLES OF OBJECTIVE REVELATIONS FROM GOD

If the Bible is allowed to speak for itself, it presents clear evidence as to the avenues God uses in the transfer of His thoughts to the mind of man. To begin, one must understand that God took the initiative to reveal Himself to mankind. The written Scriptures are God-breathed—breathed out by God (2 Tim 3:16); and men of God were moved or carried along to a destination by the Spirit of God as they wrote (2 Pet 1:21).

Perhaps the most spectacular means God used to reveal both Himself and His message to His people is through what is called an epiphany—a grand descent of God which terrified humans because of its uniqueness. Such was the visit of God to Mount Sinai when He communicated the

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<sup>12</sup> Joyce Meyer, *How to Hear from God: Learn to Know His Voice and Make Right Decisions* (Nashville: FaithWords, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 179, 181.

Ten Words to His people (Exodus 19–20). It is likely that this is what Moses encountered at the burning bush (Exodus 3) and also when he asked to see God’s glory (Exodus 33–34). Nothing in human experience could compare with milestone occurrences of this nature. They are completely beyond natural explanation.

A less spectacular avenue used by God to convey information to mankind involved *dreams*, as in the case of Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 20), Jacob and Laban (Genesis 28, 31), Joseph and Pharaoh (Genesis 40–41), and of course Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 2, 7). New Testament examples include Joseph (Matt 2:13-19), the magi (Matt 2:12), Pilate’s wife (Matt 27:19), and Peter’s trance (Acts 10:10).

While the focus of *dreams* is on what is *seen*, the emphasis of a *vision* is on what is *heard*. Examples of a vision bring to mind Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and many of the minor prophets. A clear observation can be made: Those who received dreams and visions were usually surprised by them for they did not seek or solicit them. They were given by God, apart from any desire or request of the individual.<sup>‡</sup>

Another avenue God used to communicate involved messengers. Theophanies and Christophanies, most of which are said to be the Angel of the Lord, are sprinkled throughout the OT era, from a visit to Hagar in Genesis 16 to Zechariah overhearing a conversation between the Father and the Son (Zech 1:12-13). Angels were often used to deliver God’s message, the most notable being Gabriel, the communicating angel, and Michael, the warring angel.

In both the Hebrew Scriptures and the NT, the messengers most often used were prophets and apostles. God employed the human element. This means was even requested by the people of Israel at the base of Mount Sinai, due to the great fear they had experienced when God revealed Himself to them (Exod 20:18-21).

The actual experience of the prophets and apostles in receiving a message from God is not a topic of much discussion in the Bible, other than by the phrase, “The word of the Lord came to...” We do not know how this happened, especially when dreams and visions or angels were not used. One thing is clear, many prophets and writers of the NT experi-

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<sup>‡</sup> Editor’s note: In addition, the communication was always objective and certain. There was never a sensing that God was communicating through some impression



enced this on numerous occasions. Their information was recognized by the people of God as coming from Him.

Perhaps David (in writing the Psalms), Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets did not fully realize what was happening to them the first time God gave them a message. When the writers of the NT, such as Paul and Peter, were compelled by God to write a letter to a group of believers, both writer and readers must have recognized the uniqueness of this material. Possibly NT writers conversed with each other, comparing experiences and concluding that a special work of God had been done through them (2 Pet 3:15-16).

The point that must not be missed is that no Scripture originated from the will of man (2 Pet 1:20-21). As stated previously, the message had its origin from God, and the messenger was carried along by the Holy Spirit. His own initiative played no role in whether or not he received a message from God or even understood that message completely. *Revelation did not result from self-stimulated existential or emotional experiences. In every case where God gave information to mankind, He communicated to his mind, not through his emotions* (1 Cor 2:10, 13). If God's revelation was cognitive, not emotive, then why should Christians think they can receive special revelation from God through their emotions or feelings today? Put another way, if God did not speak to Bible writers through their emotions *before* the completed Canon, why would He speak that way *today* when the Canon *is* complete? Therefore, in my opinion, since "impressions" and "inner promptings" cannot be proved as coming from God, it seems that they may be self-induced.

## B. BIBLICAL REVELATION AND THE ROLE OF FEELINGS, EMOTIONS, AND DESIRES

We must not, however, divorce emotion completely from experience. We today, as well as the people of Bible times, do have inner promptings and impressions. These are undeniable if we claim to be human. Good, as well as bad, desires come and go. But should we follow our good desires as messages from God? Is a good desire proper motive and valid reason to proceed with a course of action? Does it have the same level of authority as the Scriptures that we should obey? Consider the noble desire King David had to build the temple. This would surely have honored God and been a blessing to many. God gave a very prompt and pointed message through the prophet Nathan not to proceed (2 Samuel 6-7). God would allow a temple to be built, but not at that time or with that personnel. David was told to forego this good and acceptable desire.

Paul's *good* desire of taking the gospel to Asia (Acts 16:7), his desire to visit the saints at Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:17-18) and Rome (Rom 1:13), while commendable, did not work out because of over-riding circumstances. Good desires are just that—good desires. They are not necessarily a sign or message from God that we must pursue.

It may be that while the desire is there to do a specific service for God or follow a certain pathway of action, one may not have the giftedness from God, the right timetable, or the support of God's people. There are many who would like to be teachers of the Bible, but they lack necessary communication skills or mental ability. Many would like to be pastors, yet they lack people skills, or the staying power necessary to hold a position of that nature.

All of this leads up to the conclusion that desires, impressions, promptings, and insights are not to be put on the same level as special revelation, as found in the Bible. Interpretation and illumination in our study of Scripture are entirely different from inspiration. Our minds and motives are often flawed and scarred by sin. These flaws can be reduced but never eliminated. We are free to act on our impressions, ideas, or good desires if they do not violate Scripture. However, it must also be pointed out that *we are never instructed or encouraged in the Bible to seek, listen to, or follow inner promptings or impressions.*

There are adequate examples of satanic influence in the biblical record to make us realize that impressions must always be suspect. Though impressions, feelings, and emotions may be included in the decision-making process, the Scriptures, wisdom and common sense, opportunities and obstacles, and wise counsel, must be the primary guides in our decisions and actions.

When we do not know what action to take, what are we to do? In the case of Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13), Abraham did not ask God to show him what to do. He simply stepped aside and let Lot choose. In non-moral decisions about which Scriptures are silent, "one should exercise good judgment...and choose one's personal preference."<sup>15</sup> Neither can circumstances or open doors be our sole guiding factor. Jonah found a boat going to Tarsus, but it was hardly providential guidance (Jonah 1)!

It is also important not to forget that God gave each of us intellectual capacity far beyond what any of us use. When we seem to have an original or fresh idea come to mind, it should not be construed as new revela-

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<sup>15</sup> Friesen, *Decision Making*, 263.

tion directly from God. Though a Christian song writer may say, “God gave me this song,” or a Bible teacher may say, “God gave me this idea or insight,” it is difficult to discern if that is really what happened. Perhaps meditation and contemplation resulted in bursts of creativity from their already God-given intellect and abilities. A *new* idea may be one we previously heard or read and then forgot. God uses the ways He has gifted us, and we must acknowledge our total dependence on Him for all our godly endeavors and accomplishments.

What then is the place for emotion and feelings in our Christian experience and is it a positive one? Like every God-given human attribute it can be used for either good or ill. Since all communication from God through the Bible is of a cognitive nature, it may well be that our feelings and emotions play a vital role in our *response* to that revelation. *In other words, our intellect has the role of receiving and understanding revelation from God while our emotions have a role in responding to that revelation.* Much of our worship of God must involve our mind, but our emotions function in that experience as well. We all enjoy feeling good about worship, but that must never be the primary governing factor in worship. It is often said that doctrine divides and emotional experiences unite. This could not be more misleading and false. Anyone who has been involved in a church split knows that such divisions are very emotionally charged, and rarely over doctrinal issues. And when doctrine is an issue, it is frequently because people are too emotionally attached to their own doctrine to discuss it calmly with those who disagree.

Given the wide variety of ordeals we face as followers of Christ, we will all discover that frequently it will be in the arena of emotion and feelings that our faith will have its greatest tests. We will be discouraged, face despondency and despair. This may come as a result of doubt and disbelief in the revealed revelation of God. No child of God is immune from this major hurdle of Christian experience. It is therefore, all the more important to have an objective standard to follow.

### C. BIBLICAL REVELATION AND “BEING CALLED”

Being “called” to ministry is perhaps among the most hotly debated aspects of beginning a new ministry or planting a church. Many look to a past event in their life which had such a profound impact on them that they made a decision to pursue ministry. For myself, I see little emphases in Scripture on a personal individual experience of this nature. The focus seems to be not on *calling* but on *qualification*. A casual reading of the qualifications for Christian leaders in 1 Timothy 3 highlights several

things: aspiration, ability, and character qualities. I have personally known men who had the first but lacked the other two. It appears to be a package in which all must be present. When comparing the qualifications for priests in the OT, it is clear that the strict guidelines to be followed focused more on the physical body and lineage. The NT qualifications focus not on the external so much as on the internal. The parallel that must be noted is that in both cases there were standards which needed to be met, and these went beyond mere desire. Additionally, the emphasis of the epistles leans toward every Christian being “called” to sanctification (2 Thess 5:23-24), holiness (1 Thess 4:7, 2 Tim 1:9), and fellowship (1 Cor 1:9), rather than to specific ministries or geographic locations.

An objection may be raised that if there is no “call” it will reduce the number of people who go into vocational Christian ministry. But in actuality, it may increase it. Many effective Christian workers cannot point to a “call” from God; they desired Christian service, trained for it, and were affirmed by other Christians. Some even serve effectively without formal training, whether or not they received “the call.” We all personally know individuals who received all the training needed for Christian ministry (even with a “call”), yet when reality set in, they decided that was not what they wanted to pursue. Are they out of the will of God? Were they misdirected? Did they receive bad counsel? Did they misread their impressions or promptings? Or did it finally come to their attention that God simply had not gifted them for the service they previously desired?

#### D. BIBLICAL REVELATION AND “BEING LED BY THE SPIRIT”

Understanding the ministry of the Holy Spirit is also important, as many talk about “being led by the Spirit.” There are only two references to this in the life of the believer: Rom 8:14, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God,” and Gal 5:18, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” Based on these two verses, the phrase, *led by the Spirit*, is commonly used as rationale for proceeding with a course of action. “The Spirit led me” or “God led me” gives undisputed justification for someone’s action. It becomes the uncontested “official will of God.”

When asking a person who believes they are “led by the Spirit” how they know, it often turns out that they had a feeling, impression, prompting, or even a personal desire. Thus the Holy Spirit is reduced from being a Person to a sensation. It becomes nearly impossible to reason with someone after they have attributed this emotional sensation to the Holy Spirit. *For many, the words spiritual and mystical are indistinguishable.*

*They assume that a subjective/mystical experience is a spiritual experience and that a spiritual experience must involve something emotional.* But Biblical spirituality is not mysticism as much as it is a life of godliness. If people understood spirituality as godliness, they might not confuse it with mysticism so readily.

The greatest problem with the use of the phrase *led by the Spirit* is that in context these passages have nothing to do with guidance or making decisions. Both passages contrast the lifestyle of fleshly desires with the lifestyle of godly living. Choosing a godly lifestyle is equivalent to being led by the Spirit. Joseph Dillow refers to B. B. Warfield's observation that the word 'led' (*agō*) involves self-action: "Had Paul wanted to teach that the leading of the Spirit involved only God's work, he had another word he could have used, 'moved' (*pherō*)"<sup>16</sup> which Peter used in 1 Pet 1:21 referring to an exclusive work of God. Quoting Dillow again, "The child of God is not passive in the hands of the sanctifying Spirit. He is not 'moved' but 'led.' His own efforts enter into the progress made under the controlling influence of the Spirit."<sup>17</sup> Being led by the Spirit thus has everything to do with sanctification and nothing to do with "guidance."

It is likely that the use of this phrase ("The Spirit led me to...") will be with us for a long time because we all desire to cloak our actions in sanctimonious jargon. But how refreshing it would be if we just said what we mean: "*I felt like doing this*" or "*This is what I want to do.*" Any Christian who desires special guidance from God should remember Ps 25:9, "He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way." The qualification for being guided and taught by God is humility—realizing we have no resources within ourselves.

#### IV. THE SUFFICIENCY OF BIBLICAL REVELATION

Many would feel shackled if they were limited to the revealed Word of God. Others fear it takes too much time and effort to learn what has already been revealed.

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<sup>16</sup> Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant King*, (Hayesville: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

The writer of Psalm 119 expressed complete contentment in what God had revealed up to that time. Consider vv 9-16 where the Psalmist makes it clear that his guidance comes from God's written word:

How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to thy word

With all my heart I have sought Thee; Do not let me wander from Thy commandments.

Thy word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against Thee.

Blessed art Thou, O Lord; Teach me Thy statutes.

With my lips I have told of all the ordinances of Thy mouth.

I have rejoiced in the way of Thy testimonies, As much as in all riches.

I will meditate on Thy precepts, And regard Thy ways.

I shall delight in Thy statutes; I shall not forget Thy word.

The Word of God was his delight, his source of meditation, his means of guidance. He was convinced that it would protect him from sinful habits, and would comfort him in affliction, and guide him on the paths of life. Being the premiere acrostic psalm in the Psalter, each letter in the Hebrew alphabet is assigned eight opportunities to extol the wonders and glories of the revelation of God. The psalm presents no need for warm feelings or inner impressions when one relies 100% on God's law, ordinances, judgments, commandments, precepts, statutes, and Word.

The issue boils down to one of the primacy of God's revealed Word and its sufficiency. Are we willing to trust it completely and without hesitation?

## V. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to evaluate in a small way the place of feelings, emotions, and impressions in the decision-making process. Does God use this means, and is it something one ought to be sensitive to? Generally, people have no intention of equating subjective mysticism with divine revelation. In their mind it has far less merit than

the written Word of God. However, even the well-intentioned person can become caught up in some sort of emotional phenomenon due to biblical ignorance, or exposure to non-biblical philosophy. Christian culture has become so ingrained with spiritual language such as: “I have peace about it,” “I was praying and sensed God speaking to me,” and “God led me to...” that it is difficult to break away from these ways of thinking. And as long as these “inner, private sensations” produce life-changing experiences, it will be difficult to challenge them, especially when they appear to have value to the recipient and can be used to justify one’s actions or at least give the impression of being “in touch” with God.

Despite the intensity and pleasure derived from these spiritual encounters, the major concern will always be their lack of objectivity. In addition they can easily lead one into false doctrine and sinful actions. Therefore, impressions and promptings, feelings and mysticism, peace and burning in the bosom should not be considered as the voice of God or as a source of truth. Let us recognize this for what it really is—a counterfeit spirituality that has the potential of side-tracking Christians from letting “all Scripture” thoroughly equip them for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

## VI. AFTER WORDS

My thinking has been shaped by my reading. Early on I was exposed to *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Garry Friesen with Robin Maxson. As mentioned before, this was a liberating book for me and I eagerly await the revised edition. In my opinion it is a classic that should be mastered by every believer. Over twenty years ago, Garry addressed many of the issues raised in this article.

Bruce Waltke is a scholar’s scholar, yet he has written a very down-to-earth, and practical book: *Finding the Will of God—A Pagan Notion?*<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the greatest contribution this book made to my thinking is in regard to the practice of pagans in Bible times. Pagans sought to discover the future and determine what actions they should take. Waltke points out that “there are no examples of explicitly seeking or finding God’s will after Acts 1:24-26. After Pentecost there is no instance of the church

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Gresham, OR: Vision House Publishing, 1995)

seeking God's will through any form of divination."<sup>19</sup> Waltke suggests that God's program for guidance is: 1) Read your Bible, 2) Develop a Heart for God, 3) Seek Wise Counsel, 4) Look for God's Providence, 5) Does it Make Sense? Nothing is ever said about the need for impressions or inner sensations. This book is a *must read!*

Years ago I came across a small booklet by John MacArthur entitled, *Found: The Will of God*, in which the following suggestions were given: God's will for you is to (1) be saved, (2) be sanctified, (3) serve, (4) submit, and (5) suffer.<sup>20</sup> These summarize the Scriptural extent of God's will. MacArthur's concluding suggestion is: After you are doing the above, you can do whatever you want.<sup>21</sup>

In recent days I was directed to *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* by Arthur L. Johnson.<sup>22</sup> I was delighted to acquire this out-of-print book through the internet. It addresses the problem of encroaching mysticism in many aspects of Christianity. In the forward, Norman Geisler is right on target when he says, "The Good Ship Evangelicalism is sailing without rational rudders in the hazy sea of subjectivity. Into this fog Arthur Johnson's book comes as a beacon in the night."<sup>23</sup>

Finally, a recent book that follows the same pattern as Garry Friesen's is *Decisions, Decisions* by Dave Swavely.<sup>24</sup> This brief but helpful book has an excellent chapter on the place of feelings and impressions. The author makes an excellent point when he says, "Christians...are not content to make their choices based on the principles in the revealed Word, but want God to give them some more specific information, direction, or guidance."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>20</sup> John MacArthur, *Found: The Will of God* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1977).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur L. Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., Forward.

<sup>24</sup> Dave Swavely, *Decisions, Decisions: How (and How Not) to Make Them* (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 51.