

# **The Will of God**

## **A Valley Bible Church Position Paper**

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One of the most prevalent concerns of Christians today is how to know the will of God. Everyday we face decisions and sometimes those decisions are very significant, even life changing. Everyone wants to be sure they are making the right decision and nothing can calm our anxiety like God's stamp of approval.

Christians would agree that God has given specific revelation to us in the Bible. This is for all believers and provides us with general guidance. However, many also believe that God normally gives specific guidance (additional revelation) for individuals for personal life decisions. The purpose of this paper is to dispute this belief and show the dangers that accompany this approach toward decision making.

Christians have a propensity toward seeking God's specific guidance outside of the Bible because we know God is personal and not distant; because we know God cares for us and is not apathetic to our lives; and because we long for a more intimate relationship with God. Furthermore, we want to be certain of making the "right" decision and not be misguided.

This desire on the part of many results in a pursuit of understanding God's will not only through the God's revelation in the Bible, but also by seeking additional revelation through prayer, feelings, Bible verses taken out of context, visions, dreams, voices, et al. This paper will address God's guidance of His children in light of the Scripture.

### **Private revelation vs. public revelation**

In order to clarify the real doctrine at hand, we will use the terms "private revelation" and "public revelation." While these terms may be unfamiliar, understanding what is meant by them is necessary to frame the issue regarding how we come to know what is God's will for our life.

Private revelation is direct revelation from God to an individual that has specific application for the one who receives the revelation and no one else. Public revelation, or prophecy, is designed for those beyond the one receiving the revelation, while private revelation is intended solely for the individual with the revelation. Therefore, private revelation differs from public revelation in to whom the revelation from God is directed. Private revelation is designed for the individual alone, which is how many people claim to be discovering the will of God for their lives.

Public revelation is prophecy. On many occasions God chose to reveal Himself to man through prophets. 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.

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 to our own lives.

### **God does not give either private or public revelation today**

First, a point of clarification is necessary. We are not saying that God cannot give additional revelation today. Also, we know that God will reveal much more when Christ returns in the future. We are only saying that God has currently chosen not to do so. For biblical support for why we believe that public revelation has ceased at this present time, see our paper on prophecy.

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.

Below are several major problems with seeking God’s will through private revelation:

1. Seeking God’s will in private revelation is not Biblical.

1 Corinthians 13:8 teaches that “knowledge will be done away.” The timing of the end of God’s revelation (knowledge) is when the completion of New Testament and the conclusion of the apostolic era (1 Corinthians 13:9-10). This applies to private revelation as well as public revelation. For a more detailed discussion on the relevancy of 1 Corinthians 13 to the subject of God’s revelation, see our paper on prophecy. Since God’s revelation in the Scripture is complete, 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.

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.”

Biblical examples of private revelation are from the period of God’s special revelation to man. It should not surprise us that God gives 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.

2. 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 that 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.

3. 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 eight million dollars.

4. 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 supreme authority figure. Christians often incorporate both of these dangerously.

5. Seeking God's will in private revelation is reduced 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?

6. 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.

7. 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, and/or assigning God's reputation to a revelation that He has not made.

### **God does providentially guide us today**

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):

1. God has prepared good works for us beforehand and will guide us into these providentially (Ephesians 2:10).
2. God is able to guide us in spite of our plans (Proverbs 16:9).
3. God causes all things to providentially work out for good for those who love Him (Romans 8:28).
4. 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 (Deut. 6:4, Psalm 119:98), through 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).
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. 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.

### **We must avoid being foolish and understand the will of God**

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 our 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.