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How Does God Give Guidance Beyond the Illumination of Scripture?

Allan J. McNicol

She had come to my office with a battery of theological queries. Among her circle of friends there were few opportunities to explore sensitive theological issues; she was determined to get the most out of the visit.

Yet it was I who found the session to be a learning experience. The woman kept talking about how Jesus spoke to her and how he gave direct guidance in various situations which she confronted in her life. Clearly she was referring to some kind of communication process which she claimed took place regularly between God and herself. But how could that be? How could a person claim blithely that God and Jesus gave personal guidance in a multitude of situations that one faced in daily living?

As I emerged from the meeting I had as many questions as the woman had on her mind when she arrived at my office. What did she mean when she said that she listened to Jesus? Was this an auditory experience that others, beside the woman, would understand? Was it some form of ecstatic communication? Or was it more a leading, an impression, a sense of being persuaded? And how did she know it was God who was speaking, and not an alien or demonic power? Many other questions troubled me. These questions have led me to the following reflections.

Of course the woman was using language that is common among contemporary charismatics and neo-Pentecostals. Even in the context of generic evangelicalism this is fairly common fare. People regularly speak in such terms as Jesus “touching them,” or, “God laid it upon my heart.” What is really being claimed is that God is speaking to believers today through some form of understandable expression other than the Bible. For believers anchored in the Reformed-Restorationist heritage this language immediately draws attention. We are heirs of a long theological heritage which teaches that the appearance of signs, wonders, and extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit ceased by the end of the New Testament period. We have tended to view claims that the Spirit guides our lives in some sentient way to be peripheral, at best, and even vacuous.

But this can hardly be the last word on the matter. Anyone who teaches a Bible class regularly will be asked to give an explanation as to how God answers prayer. If we are offended by the terminology of the charismatics how do we give an intelligible explanation as to how God is active and Sovereign in our lives. How do we describe the work of the Holy Spirit today?

Historically speaking, churches in the Restoration Tradition find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. We claim to be people who are attempting to be the church of the New Testament, and the New Testament is marked by many accounts of the early heroes of the faith hearing divine calls and responding to them (Acts 8:29; 16:6-7; 2 Cor 12:1-5; Rev 1:1). Yet we maintain that these kinds of experiences have ceased (the “cessationist” view). Since for most people today experience is a key factor in understanding how God is directing their lives, cessationist

presuppositions are very unpopular. To many they appear to be marked by inner contradictions and may even cut the ground out from under our apologetic.¹ Perhaps a theological case on behalf of cessationism can be developed successfully; it would be a welcome contribution.² But, at the very least, to get a hearing such a contribution must offer reasonable suggestions as to how God guides and directs believers today. Otherwise, if we are left only with a vague concept of inner illumination brought by rational study, why persist with spiritual disciplines such as confession of sin, prayer, and talk about a direct walk with God?

A Proposal

In this essay our main focus will be on a restricted but critical question. Based on what the New Testament says about how God intervened and revealed himself to the earliest Christians, what can believers today expect to receive as "guidance" from God apart from the study of scripture?

¹Although this is no proof of the truth of either cessationism or neo-Pentecostalism, there is no question that the twentieth century has rendered its verdict on the appeal of these respective theological orientations. While cessationist groups like the Restoration Movement deriving from the Campbell-Stone Reformation of the nineteenth century have languished, charismatic and neo-Pentecostalist movements have undergone tremendous growth.

²It is taken as a given that there is a close relationship between the function of the Holy Spirit and the word in the New Testament. For example, in the occurrence of conversions in the early church what is attributed to the power of the Spirit, is likewise attributed to the influence of the word. Both Peter and Paul attest that the believer is begotten through the living word of God or the gospel (1 Pet 1:23-25; 1 Cor 4:15). But, at the same time, one is also born of the Spirit (Gal 4:29; Titus 3:5; cf. John 3:4-5). And the observation made repeatedly by the nineteenth century Restorationists remains true. Despite all of the remarkable manifestations of the Spirit in the book of Acts whenever someone was converted (even in the case of Paul) a preacher was at hand giving instructions as to what was necessary to do.

Procedurally, our study will first note briefly that the extreme positions of both contemporary cessationists and charismatics with respect to the continuity or discontinuity of extraordinary expressions of the Spirit in the first century are often overdrawn. It will be concluded that God manifests his presence with his people today just as he did in the first century, although materially, the actual mode of expression that this presence takes will always be contextualized. Second, this argument will be fortified by looking briefly at the role of the witness of the Spirit in Jesus and Paul in early Christianity. Finally, on the basis of all this evidence, we will venture to draw some conclusions as to what is entailed in apprehending the work of the Spirit in functioning as a regulative principle that gives shape to the Christian life.³

Re-Visiting Cessationism

Cessationism is the idea that manifestations of the Spirit such as the occurrence of extraordinary healings, miracles, and the startling manifestations of the Spirit (e.g., speaking in tongues), were necessary to establish nascent Christianity. Once Christianity was firmly established in history, there being no further need for these extraordinary expressions of the Spirit, such expressions of the Spirit are considered to have ceased.⁴

At the outset it should be noted that in using such terminology as “extraordinary spiritual manifestations” or “miraculous gifts” we betray

³I am indebted to John Yates (“How Does God Speak To Us Today? Biblical Anthropology and the Witness of the Holy Spirit,” *Churchman* 107 [1993] 106) for my use of the term “regulative principle” in connection with the need to find a coherent way of speaking about the witness of the Holy Spirit.

⁴It would take at least a monograph to discuss adequately both the exegetical issues and the use of evidence drawn from church history by cessationists and non-cessationists in favor of their respective arguments. We need to confine our remarks to several brief paragraphs.

our dependence on a world-view that is contrary to the main drift of biblical thinking. In the Enlightenment, (1650–1806) debates on miracles tended to focus on the perception that the workings of nature could be compared with a great machine; any extraordinary happening that broke the laws that governed the operation of that machine was “supernatural” or miraculous. But the Bible does not understand the world in such categories; it views the world continuously sustained by a gracious God. Nature is not self-contained and self-explanatory.⁵ Due to the creative power of God, new and different things continue to occur. In the Bible some of these things are deemed remarkable, and are considered to be so significant for the life of the community, that they are called “signs and wonders.”⁶ Events like the Exodus and certain actions carried out by Jesus in his ministry, are thus labeled as “signs, powers, and wonders” (Deut 4:34; 6:22–23; John 2:11; 11:47–48). These dramatic events were considered to be attestations of the creative power of God working among his people. This understanding of the working of God is part of the warp and woof of biblical faith.

Some of these happenings described in the Bible as “signs and wonders” are, in our parlance, non-miraculous (Isa 20:3; Ezek 12:1–11; 24:15–27).⁷ The crucial point is not that, in the course of history, new or unusual things occur; but that the people of God, through the canon of Scripture, have designated a particular number of these occurrences in the biblical period as so significant, that they have been marked off as being

⁵Ted Peters, “Response to John Cobb,” *Dialog* 30 (1991) 244.

⁶Neither Hebrew or Greek has an exact word equivalent for what moderns understand by the word “miracle.”

⁷D. A. Carson, “The Purpose of Signs and Wonders in the New Testament,” *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992) 94.

definitive attestations of the nature and purpose of God. These signs, wonders, and extraordinary demonstrations of power stood as criteria for assessing whether later claims for the appearance of revelatory occurrences among the people of God could be accepted. For these reasons, strict cessationism is untenable.⁸

On the other hand, it should be noted that in recent years a significant branch of the charismatic movement has claimed that the appearance of signs and wonders of biblical proportions should be considered a normal part of the life of the church. It is no different than

⁸Some of the extreme exegetical positions of cessationists need to be challenged. In essence their position is as follows: the full revelation of the Christian Faith was given in the era of the apostles. In the words of Jude 3 it was "once delivered to all the saints." Special signs were given for the specific purpose of corroborating this once-and-for-all message (Mark 16:17-18). But once the perfect revelation (cf. 1 Cor 13:8-10) was preached and attested with signs, and the inspired writers of the New Testament had completed their words, the time of spiritual gifts ended. Note *Spiritual Sword* 25 (July, 1994) especially 30-31, 33, which adheres to this position. Yet, such exegesis is not compelling. Jude 3 presumes that the earliest gospel proclamation had a consistent texture of moral demands "once and for all delivered . . ." and functions as a call for faithfulness in light of evidence of immorality in the early Christian Community. Cf. Carrol D. Osburn, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Abilene, Texas: Restoration Perspectives, 1994) 122. Even if the text of Mark 16:17-18 is part of the work of the composer of Mark, there is not a word there about the cessation of the signs. It is quite a stretch to claim that the Greek word *bebaioō* ("to confirm") in Mark 16:20 means to furnish attestation that, once produced, is no longer needed. The word is generally thought to carry the notion of "making firm" or "to establish." Finally, with respect to 1 Cor 13:10, years ago Robertson and Plummer in the original ICC Commentary on *First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914) 297 said it all, "The apostle is saying nothing about the cessation of charismata in this life: prophesyings and knowledge might always be useful. All that he asserts is, that these things will have no use when completeness is revealed and therefore they are inferior to love." For a thorough critique of traditional cessationist arguments which needs to be taken seriously see Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles* JPTSS 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

the process of conversion.⁹ But this is an inflated claim and can be discounted by the empirical evidence. Thoughtful observers note that the healings in modern charismatic healing lines are psycho-somatic in nature, and, formally, are no different than those claimed to take place at Lourdes, or among similar movements or places in Islam or Hinduism. This is not to deny that God is active and does, in response to prayer, bring genuine healing from illness. But one suspects that such actions of God occur as much in non-charismatic churches as charismatic churches. What is questionable is the claim that God has selected certain contemporary individuals “anointed” as his agents to perform signs, powers, and wonders.

In this connection, Paul’s experience may be especially apropos. Paul had the capacity to do “signs and wonders” (2 Cor 12:12). Yet he was often derided because he could not even heal himself (2 Cor 1:8–10; 10:1–13:10). The practice of calling mass assemblies, working people to a fever-pitch through emotional preaching, and then performing “miracles” is totally at odds with the picture of Paul we find in the Bible. Leander Keck, having spent a lifetime studying the pattern of Paul’s conduct of his life, has observed

One can as easily imagine Paul announcing a Spirit-healing service as one can imagine him throwing a Halloween party.¹⁰

⁹Carson, “The Purpose of Signs and Wonders,” 90. Basically, we have reference to various developments in the charismatic movement that have, at the time of writing, crystallized around such entities as the Vineyard Fellowship. According to Carson, the essential theology behind such thinking is that since Jesus inaugurated the kingdom with extraordinary events heralding the defeat of Satan, and since the struggle with Satan is still going on, one may expect similar evidences of these victories today paralleling what happened in the New Testament period.

¹⁰Leander Keck, *Paul and His Letters* (2d ed.; Proclamation Commentaries; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 96.

For Paul, above all, the regulative principle for the working of God's Spirit was that although the messenger was a very weak vessel, the Spirit functioned to undergird the message with power (2 Cor 12:9-10: 13:3-4; Rom 8:17-27). For Paul, while undergoing sufferings on behalf of his message to the world, the Spirit gave him the capacity to continue a pattern of conformity with the ministry of Jesus; and he even considered that through this vicarious suffering a process of rectification in the human community was facilitated (2 Cor 4:7-12; cf. Col 1:24). It seems that the pattern of Paul's life may be a more helpful clue to view the contextualization of the Spirit of Christ working in the world today than to look for amazing signs worked by faith-healers in mass assemblies. We will now follow this lead and see what evidence is discovered as we further explore both Jesus' and Paul's understanding of the role of the Spirit in guiding believers today.

Jesus and the Spirit

The gospel accounts give every indication that Jesus was a person who undergirded his mission with a disciplined life of communion with God. This is evident particularly in their testimony as to the importance of prayer in Jesus' life (Matt 11:25-27//Luke 10:21-22; Matt 26:36-46//Mark 14:32-42//Luke 22:40-46; cf. Heb 5:7-8) as well as the example of his teaching (Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-5).

In itself it is unremarkable that Jesus was one who was concerned actively with a walk with God. He was a Jew who was raised with the heritage of the Psalms and other treasures which could be drawn from a huge store-house of Hebrew piety. As one called to carry out a prophetic mission, it is reasonable to assume that he would be vitally involved with perceiving the ways of God.

When one looks more closely at Jesus' spiritual life two outstanding features emerge. One is Jesus' experience of closeness with the Father. The second involves a conviction on Jesus' part that in some special sense the Spirit was "poured out" upon him in his earthly mission. Both of these features function as precedents for later Christian reflection and devotion.¹¹ Yet, a close reading of the gospels indicates that there is a unique element woven into Jesus' communion with God. The emphasis on the specialness of Jesus' Sonship should make us very cautious in attempting easily to draw direct correspondences between Jesus' spiritual life and our own daily walk with God. Similarly, the same reservation applies to the latter.

Jesus' Closeness with the Father

Jesus' communion with God comes to expression in his sense of absolute dependence upon God as Father. In Matt 23:9, Jesus spoke to his disciples of the need to call God "Father." These were men accustomed to addressing their own fathers with terms of endearment which were summed up in the Aramaic word *abba*. Now Jesus exhorted them no longer to use *abba* with respect to any human. By coming into Jesus' circle of followers they were constituted into a family whose sole head was "the father in heaven."¹² He was the true ground and sustainer of this new community. They were to live in total dependence upon his gracious provisions (Matt 16:31-32). Without question, there is ample evidence that Jesus taught his disciples to instantiate this reliance by opening their

¹¹In particular, the Book of Acts gives many examples of the latter feature.

¹²It is widely accepted that the Aramaic word *abba* rests behind the Greek word for father in Matt 23:9. See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 48-49.

prayers with the expression "Our Father . . ." The model prayer (Matt 6:9-13//Luke 11:2-4) opens with this address. If earthly fathers knew how to give good things to their children, how much more does "the Father in Heaven" know how to take care of his special family (Matt 7:11; cf. Luke 11:13). This teaching of the need for utter dependence upon the Father, which was instilled by Jesus in his disciples, continued in the early church where even the expression *abba* was used in the Greek-speaking communities (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15). Truly Jesus' sense of deep dependence upon the Father was transferred to the community which he founded.

But granted Jesus' closeness to God, is it possible to learn more about how he received guidance from the Father? Was there something in his relationship that may serve as a model as to how believers today may expect direction from God?

Here we need to be careful. In the context of teaching his disciples to pray, using the *abba* expression, the gospel hints that Jesus may have a special relationship with the Father not shared by the disciples. For example, there is no evidence that Jesus ever joined the disciples in communal prayer activity using the address "Our Father." On the other hand, there is abundant evidence that Jesus, in his own prayer life, frequently used the expression, "My Father," perhaps distinguishing himself, in a certain way, from the disciples with respect to his relationship to the Father.¹³ Some have even argued that the same understanding is present in Jesus' decision to elect twelve as the newly re-

¹³*Viz.*, 13 times in Matthew and 25 times in John. For a detailed discussion see J. Jeremias *The Prayers of Jesus* (SBT Second Series 6; London: SCM Press, 1967) 44-48. In retrospect, some of Jeremias' conclusions may be overstated. The reader is advised to weigh them very carefully before using them in teaching and preaching.

constituted Israel rather than include himself as the twelfth!¹⁴ Thus, in his role of re-gathering Israel, Jesus, as God's special representative, is distinct from the disciples in his relationship with the Father.

The crucial Synoptic gospel text in this connection is Matt 11:25–27 // Luke 10:21–22.¹⁵ Here, in a series of exclamations, Jesus refers to the relationship between himself (the Son) and the Father (God). As opposed to the wise (the power structure of Israel), it is claimed that through the works of Jesus, God has made his will known to the “simple disciples” (*ēpioi*, Matt 11:25). The latter were followers of Jesus who did not come from the scribal class. In just three verses (Matt 11:25–27), there are five instances of the expression “Father,” and three of “Son,” indicating a strong sense of personal relationship between the two.¹⁶ Of course, we have no direct access to Jesus' own internal perception of his relationship with the Father. But Matthew intimates that it must have been close when he emphasizes a strong Son of God Christology throughout his Gospel (Matt 1:23–25; 3:17; 16:16–18; 17:5, 27:54).

Yet, this crucial relationship between the Father and the Son does not seem to consist of the Father communicating esoteric information to

¹⁴In other words, over and against the twelve, Jesus saw himself in some unique relationship with the Father. J. D. G. Dunn *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) 25–26.

¹⁵The author assumes that the Johannine references to “my Father” are heavily influenced by the special Johannine Christological perspective that Jesus consciously reveals in his earthly ministry the nature of the eternal relationship between Father and Son (cf. John 3:35; 8:19; 10:15; 14:9).

¹⁶J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975) 64.

the Son.¹⁷ Rather, the things that are revealed (Matt 11:25) appear to be “the deeds” of Jesus, which are stated in Matthew 11:2, 25. And as elaborated in Matthew 11:5 these were the equivalent of the visible “mighty works” of his ministry (Matt 11:20–24). They were visible for all to see. The “knowing” of the Father by the Son is simply an expression of the total unity of Father and Son in will and purpose.¹⁸ Jesus’ revealing of the Father to the “simple disciples” (Matt 11:25), is done totally through his messianic ministry, which is received by them as the Revelation of God. The sense of Jesus’ uniqueness does not rest in his inner life but in what is accomplished in his mission.

In his dedicated service to God, Jesus saw himself carrying out his mission with the same intensity as an obedient Son who follows the word of the Father. By the way he fulfilled these responsibilities obediently, Jesus was unique. But the power of his legacy is not in some special intuition or connection which he was able to develop in his inner nature with the Father, but in the persistence of his mission when he refused to quit: even with the threat of the cross.

Perhaps Jesus had the capacity to do this because he knew that the Father was gracious and cared for his creation; and in that light he was prepared to respond to such love with an obedience that knows no limits.

¹⁷It is generally understood that the occurrence of the *Bath Qol* (divine voice) at the Baptism and Transfiguration (Matt 3:17 parr. and Matt 17:5 parr.) has precedents in other Jewish literature and is used by the Gospel authors to highlight the special significance of these occasions for Jesus’ story. In other words, their major function is not for Jesus’ spiritual development, but to highlight Jesus’ significance for the reader.

¹⁸Kingsbury, *Matthew*, 64.

The Spirit Upon Jesus

The gospels leave us with little room for doubt that the baptism of Jesus was an event of fundamental importance for the mission of Jesus. Luke, in particular, stresses the importance of the coming of the Spirit, as a sort of commission empowering Jesus for ministry (Luke 3:21–22; 4:1, 11, 18). There is no question, either, that what subsequently ensued in Jesus' ministry was a series of healings and exorcisms indicating that God was inaugurating a new epoch of his rule among his people. The Holy Spirit was the agency that provided the power for these works.

Although it is strange that there are relatively few references to the Holy Spirit in Jesus' ministry in the Synoptics, the classical text of Matt 12:28//Luke 11:20 leaves no doubt about the role of the Spirit in Jesus' ministry. Matthew 12:28 says that Jesus casts out the demons by the Spirit of God. And the parallel "finger of God" in Luke 11:20 is simply Luke's attempt, as with many of his other arguments, to ground this expression of the working of the power of God in the scriptures (Exod 8:19; 31:18; Deut 9:10; Ps 8:3).¹⁹ Thus, when these astonishing events occurred in Jesus' mission, the appropriate conclusion was that the new eschatological era had arrived; not that Jesus was merely a sage with extraordinary spiritual powers.

Consequently, the great error would be to deny that the expressions of the coming of the Kingdom were the work of the Spirit. In Matt 12:31–32, Jesus solemnly declares that this cannot be forgiven. This does not mean that this sin was tied to a failure to accept the Spirit when it was working in some special "age of miracles." (After all Matt 7:21–23

¹⁹Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1958) 107.

warns that the working of special signs and powers were not always the product of the Holy Spirit.)²⁰ What is unforgivable is to confuse the work of Jesus with that of Beelzebul (Matt 12:31–32) by saying that Jesus is possessed by the Devil (Mark 3:22, 28–30).²¹

As the “stronger one” who is seizing the goods of the “strong man” by his exorcisms done in the power of the Spirit, Jesus was defeating Satan (Matt 12:29//Mark 3:27). But this must always be seen not as some extraordinary expression of special power within Jesus, but an indication of the coming of a new age. These expressions highlight the significance and importance of the Spirit in Jesus’ ministry but provide no clear indication of the role the Spirit played in Jesus’ own spiritual life. Indeed, our analysis of the best historical sources indicates that Jesus was not an ecstatic or charismatic.²² No doubt Jesus had a deep sense of the presence of God in his life. But the Synoptics do not stress this as an extraordinary *inner* spiritual capacity, but as a reflection of what was taking place eschatologically in his day-by-day ministry in Israel.

Paul and the Spirit

It is to belabor the obvious to assert that Paul also was a person of the Spirit. For Paul, the Holy Spirit was the special agent that energized the Christian for living in Christ. To use a metaphor drawn from John, the

²⁰As well noted by D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* 8 (ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 291.

²¹Luke 12:10–11 appears to view the matter in a somewhat different way. In his setting, Luke intimates that blasphemy against the Spirit is the rejection of Jesus by a disloyal disciple in a critical period of testing by refusing to be led by the Spirit. cf. R. C. Tannehill, *Luke in Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 203. See also Luke 21:12–19//Mk 13:11.

²²Contra J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 88, albeit he is somewhat equivocal in his final assessment.

living vine is dead without the life-giving nutrition. That nutrition was the Spirit. It was the mode of Christ's presence in the early Christian community.

The Charismatic Paul

Paul taught that, by the agency of the Spirit, one was incorporated into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13; cf. Titus 3:5). Basically, he said that when one is baptized one is initiated into a corporate entity (the church) that derives its existence from Christ. Christ is the head of the corporate entity (church) which, to complete the metaphor, is called "his body." The believer is not personally connected with Christ as a kind of isolated island, but to the body. Yet Christ, through the animating power of the Spirit, is active in us through the corporate life of the body.

Christ, through the agency of the Spirit, gives certain gifts for building up the church (1 Cor 12:4-31; Rom 12:3-8; cf. Eph 4:7-16). The gifts are not for our personal benefits but to enable us to fulfill the mission of Christ. The gifts (charismata) for Paul were of two essential kinds: word and deed (Rom 15:18). With respect to the latter there would be gifts of leadership, administration, and the capacity to heal. Examples of the former would be speaking with God's power, prophecy, speaking in tongues, and discernment. In his sovereign distribution to believers it appears that God gives each one several gifts. Paul's gifts fell mainly within the area of the word. He clearly spoke in tongues (1 Cor 14:18). And he was prepared to put his authoritative word up against any prophet (1 Cor 14:36). He attributes his coming to belief in Jesus to revelation (Gal 1:12, 16-17). And, to cap all of this, Paul speaks about taking a spiritual journey of ascent to paradise (the throne of God?) where he hears

inexpressible words (2 Cor 12:4).²³ It is one of the great ironies of the West that Paul is remembered for being the one who first systematized the Christian Faith into some semblance of doctrinal order. Krister Stendahl is closer to the truth about Paul when he claims that his letters reflect his major concern which was, through the intercession of prayer, to call upon God's support and guidance for a fledgling Christian community. Above all, Paul was a man of the Spirit.²⁴

Guidance of the Spirit in the Believer's Life

Yet it is remarkable how reticent Paul is with respect to references to the nature of his direct guidance from the Lord. Aside from claiming that his ascent to Paradise was the highest form of revelation, which even exceeded that of his spiritual opponents, Paul refuses to speak about it (2 Cor 12:1–12; cf. 2 Cor 10:12; 11:5; 12:1). The matter of Gal 1:11–12 is a little more difficult. Here Paul claims to have received his gospel in a revelation from Jesus Christ. But, again, several points need to be remembered. Whatever Paul received from the Lord in the Damascus experience was a once-and-for-all revelation. This revelation ended a direct chain of revelatory appearances to the apostles commencing with the revelation to Peter (1 Cor 15:3–8). Even granted that in the appearance mentioned in Galatians 1, the Lord spoke with Paul about the mission of the Gentiles, the whole episode appears to be more of a

²³For analysis of the text see A. T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991 [1981]) 71–86. Also J. D. Tabor *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to paradise in its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1986) 113–127 is useful.

²⁴Krister Stendahl, "Paul at Prayer," in *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1984) 151–161.

commissioning scene rather than the transfer of information.²⁵ Thus, even, for Paul, the arch-charismatic of the New Testament, such terminology as “the Lord told me this” and “the Lord told me that,” cannot be documented.

There is one text (Rom 8:15–27), however, where we get the closest discussion in Paul with respect to what it means to have regular guidance of the Spirit in our lives. In Romans 8:15 Paul asserts that we have received the Spirit of sonship. This reminds us that for Paul Christ’s lordship in the believer’s life is made effective by the presence of the Spirit. In the power of this Spirit, Christ and the early Christians addressed God as Father. So may we. Then, in Rom 8:16, for purposes of analysis, Paul draws a distinction between our spirits and the Holy Spirit. He asserts that the Spirit of God bears witness to our spirits that we are children of God. Paul goes on to argue that as God’s children we are heirs: not of an earthly territory, but of a new restored world if we co-suffer with Christ.²⁶

Here, as we noted earlier, Paul introduces a theme that permeates his whole theology. The entire Christian journey is God’s way of teaching us that his strength is made effective through weakness. In this way our lives are made to conform to the way of Christ. Paul learned this insight after his journey of mystical ascent (2 Cor 12:8–10; see also 2 Cor 4:7). We must learn it in our day-by-day walk with the Lord.

²⁵Markus Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 174 sums up a study of revelation in Paul by saying, “Paul gives no palpable indication of basing the authority of doctrine on a private vision. . . . He exercises his stewardship of the divine mysteries by couching new disclosures in fully traditional language and biblical reasoning.”

²⁶“Provided we suffer with him” (Rom 8:17).

We come to understand that the world is pregnant with the glory of the next world (8:19–22). And in the same way our lives in the church are shadows of what will be (8:23–25).²⁷ As our spirits share in this struggle we are brought into collaboration with Christ. In this shared struggle with fellow believers in the body we *bear the Lord speaking*; not in some supernatural dimension beyond the normal working of our senses, but in our common sharing with sisters and brothers in the groaning of the creation as we complete Christ's suffering for it (cf. Col 1:24). It is here that we find hope that sustains us as we await the fulfillment of the new age. How we conceptualize this kind of spiritual communication remains something of a mystery.²⁸ It certainly goes beyond the level of the mystical or the intuitive. Many have had the experience of going through a deep crisis, and after constant prayer, finally coming to peace with themselves, sensing a way forward. Many times we only appreciate this word in retrospect. Could it be that our Creator who made us and knows us far better than we know ourselves has transmitted a word to us through avenues deep within our minds and senses, and we have heard?²⁹

Conclusion

The focus of this essay has been to address, in the light of our historic Christian Faith, the crucial issue of how we may expect to receive the guidance of God in our lives today. We have rejected both hard-line

²⁷I am indebted to N. T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 85–86 for dramatically making me aware of this image in Paul.

²⁸Theologically, a full scale anthropology would be needed to work it out.

²⁹Yates, "How Does God Speak To Us Today," 120, reminds us that much current neurophysiology and cybernetic research construes the human as having different levels of perception rather than having separate entities of mind, soul, and spirit, etc.

cessationism and the triumphalist proclamations of some forms of current neo-Pentecostalism. Analysis of the spiritual life of Jesus and Paul reveals that they were deeply sensitive to the divine demand, rather than giving evidence for special communicative powers with the Heavenly Father. While always understanding that there are such things as false signs and wonders (Matt 7:21–23), we have argued that we need to be sensitive to the Lord and his demands as he directs through his Spirit today. So, we sum up this discussion in the following two theses:

1. God never tells his people to do things that violate his commands given to the church in scripture. Scripture sets the boundaries for determining what constitutes a valid word of God for the Church.
2. By being conformed to Christ and sharing his sufferings, we stand in an appropriate situation to hear his gracious word, and to determine the particular form of his guidance and thus avoid spiritual and moral suicide. It is in the cross-shaped life that God communicates meaning, hope, and above all, presence. In short, in the cruciform life we go deeper into the heart of God.

A Postscript on Prophecy in Acts

In this essay we have been concerned to discuss the thorny issue of how the believer receives a word of guidance from the Triune God beyond illumination gained directly from Scripture in order to live the Christian life today. The author is painfully aware that this is an exploratory essay. There are a number of areas that need to be discussed more thoroughly, such as thoughtful reflection on prayer in the biblical tradition and the teachings of the Gospel and Letters of John. Another area would be to discuss the function of the Spirit in Acts.

One point which is directly relevant to the matter needs to be made. It involves the issue of whether we can construe certain expressions of prophecy in Acts which convey a direct word of the Lord as having some analogues in the contemporary church.

First, it needs to be underscored that Luke-Acts regards the reception of the gift of the Spirit at conversion as a fundamental element of the Christian life for each Christian. This encompasses the promise of the coming of a prophetic Spirit, as found in Joel 2:17–21, as being realized not just at Pentecost but functioning as a prototype for the gifts of the Spirit that are referred to throughout Acts.³⁰

Second, in Acts the coming of this prophetic spirit in part involves the Spirit, under the direction of the risen Lord, giving guidance either through revelatory visions/dreams (Acts 7:55–56; 9:10–18; 10:10–20; 16:9–10; 18:9–10; 22:17–18, 21; 23:11) or revelatory instruction (Acts 8:29; 10:19; 11:12, 28; 13:2, 4; 15:28; 16:6–7; 19:21; 20:22–23; 21:4).³¹

Third, in keeping with the rejection of a strict cessationist perspective, as argued in this essay, the author sees no exegetical reason to claim that the promises of the prophetic Spirit of Acts 2:17–21, as interpreted by Luke as coming to pass in the early church, have been rescinded.

Fourth, however, it is instructive to note (see note 2 above) that these words of prophetic instruction, coming from the risen Lord through the vehicle of the Spirit, function in Acts either as aids to bring people to

³⁰See Max Turner, *Power From on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* JPTSS 9 Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) 348–349.

³¹Turner, *Power From on High*, 349–350.

a knowledge of the gospel or for service which is based on it. And this is always communicated to humans in intelligible speech.

From this we conclude that Acts maintains that the Triune God does furnish a word of guidance to believers apart from Scripture, but that it never obviates or qualifies that truth of the Gospel which is found in human language in Scripture. However, as far as setting forth an anthropology that would enable us to understand this process of the contemporary guidance of the Spirit, Acts does not take us beyond what we learned from our study in Paul.

Finally, we within the Restoration Movement need to open our eyes to some very important exhaustive exegetical works being produced by a new generation of scholars who have emerged in the Charismatic Movement. A dialogue needs to be opened. We can do no better than close with the words of one of these scholars spoken with reference to the debate between cessationists and non-cessationists.

The positive way forward for the church lies in the combination of wisdom of both sides not in the arrogant and alienating polemics between them. In this context we may perhaps be permitted to conclude with words drawn from the exhortation of Ephesians 3:3-6, . . . With all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, *strive eagerly to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*³²

³²Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1996) 358-359.

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