

The Use of the Bible as a Source of Divine Guidance on Matters which it does not Directly Address: Is it Scriptural?¹

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Abstract

Many Christians believe that the whole Bible is the inspired Word of God. In it, they believe, they can find God's authoritative will for their lives and that it can be used as a source of divine guidance concerning matters which are not directly addressed in it. This belief has led to a practice that must be questioned: the decontextualising of scripture in order to recontextualise it to say something it was not originally meant to say. The recontextualised meaning is then taken as a personal message from God and used to legitimise beliefs, decisions and actions. The most unfortunate result is that this practice has led to the assumption that such guidance is not to be questioned, since it is 'from the Lord'. This paper shows why both the practice and the actual and possible

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assumptions underlying the practice are wrong. It then provides an alternative approach to the reading of scripture for ascertaining God's will concerning everyday decision-making matters. The alternative approach is based on better assumptions and is less open to spiritual deception.

1. Introduction

Many Christians believe that the Bible is not only the inspired Word of God, but also that it has authority for their daily lives (Nel 2017:6). Knowing the will of God is, therefore, of no little importance to them (Fee 2004; Friesen and Maxson 2004; Mumford 1971; Pritchard 2004; Robinson 1998; Sproul 2009; Weiss 1950). There are several texts in the Bible that explain this, but arguably none referred to or quoted more than Romans 12:2.

However, many Christians, especially those in the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, believe that scripture can be used as a source of divine guidance concerning matters which are not directly addressed in it, for example, whether to further their education after school, which career to pursue or which offer of employment to accept, who to marry, where to live, which car or house to buy and even whom or where to evangelise.³ This belief has led to a practice that must be questioned.

³ French Arrington (1994:104), for example, states that Pentecostals, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, 'allow the message of the text to speak to real problems of persons in their daily lives' and that this illumination is not restricted to the literal meaning of a text. Joyce Meyer (2003:39) writes that 'The Bible has an answer for every question we might ever ask... For example, the written Word of God, the *logos* Word, doesn't tell us when to buy a new car or what type of car to buy; we may need a spoken or revealed word (a *rhema*) from God concerning that'. She seems to mean that a text or a portion of it may be appropriated as a 'word from God' about the car when that text becomes 'illuminated' or 'made alive' for the reader, even

2. The Practice and its Problems

The way the Bible is appropriated as a source of divine guidance to ascertain God's will on matters which are not directly addressed in it is straightforward: a text is decontextualised and recontextualised. The result, in each instance, is exactly the same: it says something it was not originally meant to say. What is disconcerting about this practice is that the recontextualised meaning is then taken as a personal message from God and used to legitimise beliefs, decisions and actions of either oneself or those of others. The most unfortunate result is that this practice has led to the assumption that such guidance is not to be questioned, since it is 'from the Lord'. To understand the gravity of the problems this practice leads to, consider the following four real examples.

A woman, during time for testimony subsequent to a Sunday service, informed her fellow Christians that 'God had told her' during the past week that a Christian who buys milk, bread and a newspaper on Sundays sins against God. She then quoted Exodus 20:8–10. When her pastor corrected her understanding of the Sabbath using the teachings of the New Testament, she promptly left, never to return. In bitterness she 'joined' another church. If this incident is probed a little further, we will find that it is far from being an exception. However, on the one hand,

if that is not what the author of the text means. One reason that may explain her questionable distinction between *logos* and *rhema* is her belief that God's answers to our everyday questions 'are hidden in the pages of his written Word' (ibid, p. 42). Priscilla Shirer (2009:5) says, 'I want God's specific revelation to flow through my heart... When I say I want to hear from God, I mean that I need to know what job He wants me to take. I need to know what spouse He wants me to marry. I need to know whether He's calling me into full-time ministry or if He wants me to stay in my full-time, corporate job ... if I'm supposed to buy this house or that one ... if I'm supposed to live in Chicago or Dallas. I need specifics. I'm looking for details'.

this sincere and devout woman strongly believed that what she did was ‘spiritual’ and that God had given, both her and her fellow Christians, a message to change their ways. But suppose her pastor and her fellow Christians had believed her, would it have made sense to conclude that they are mistaken, misguided or even deceived by the devil? On the other hand, she also, although ignorantly and unintentionally so, did something that is clearly not from the Lord, namely, to enslave Christians by reverting them to the keeping of Old Testament laws from which Christ has set them free (cf. Rom 14; 1 Cor 7:23; Gal 3–6; Col 2:8, 20–23). Is it, therefore, right to conclude that God had not spoken to her in the manner she claimed? If we are right in our deduction, what should we think about her utterance? Is it a case of using the name of the Lord in vain (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11) and/or a case of uttering an ‘idle word’ for which she has to account for one day to our Lord (Matt 12:36)?

The next example pertains to the prayer meeting that was recently held on the farm Wilde Als outside Bloemfontein. When Angus Buchan was asked how many people he expected to turn up for the prayer meeting, he said ‘the Lord gave me a clear word ... that there will be a million people’ (Hogg 2017a). What he did not say was what the source of that ‘word’ was. A few days later, during an interview with Alec Hogg on 21 April, Graham Power said that ‘two weeks ago’, on the day Buchan visited him in Cape Town, ‘God gave me Isaiah 66 Verse 8, where it says a nation can be born in a day and I went to him and said to him, Angus, this is the word that I believe God has dropped in my spirit this morning for you ... what I told him was, a 1 million mandate’ (Hogg 2017b). In a personal letter addressed to Buchan, a few days before the meeting, he was asked to explain how he received his mandate from the Lord. A single-sentence response from an assistant made no mention of Power; it simply states that ‘Mr Buchan received his mandate by

spending time with the Lord and reading the Word of God systematically on a daily basis'.⁴ A quick reading of the context of Isaiah 66:8 shows that what Power felt 'God has dropped in his spirit' and what Buchan claimed to be his 'clear word' from the Lord cannot legitimately be applied to South Africans, let alone a prayer meeting and a million people. So was it a divine 'word from the Lord' that Power and Buchan received or not?⁵

The next example is closely related to the previous one. For many years, 'the Statement of Fundamental Truths of British Assemblies of God pointed to Isaiah 28:11 (KJV: "For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people") as scriptural support for the doctrine of the speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit' (Davies 2009a:226). Although Andrew Davies, Vice-Principal of Mattersey Hall Graduate School of theology in England, acknowledges that nothing in the context can justify the meaning predicated of it, he adds, 'However, for Pentecostals, this is a perfectly legitimate recontextualisation of a divine promise' (ibid). If that is a legitimate practice, what could prevent an individual or group from using any text in the Bible as a 'promise from God' or to authorise false beliefs, unwise decisions or bizarre actions of Christians? And who is to say that it is wrong? Furthermore, does recontextualisation imply or entail that the authority of the Word of God can be subjected to or be replaced by the authority of its readers? Most relevant to the

⁴ E-mail correspondence on file.

⁵ Cindy Jacobs (1995:74), a recognised 'apostle' and 'prophet' in the New Apostolic Movement says, 'Sometimes wolves in sheep's clothing manipulate Scripture for their own purposes'. It is unfortunate that she does not say why she limits this practice to 'wolves'. Devout and sincere Christians do that all the time, as we will shortly see. For the use and abuse of scripture in what is known as the 'prosperity gospel' of the Faith movement, see DR McConnell (1988:170–183).

problem is the next question: If this kind of appropriation of a text is wrong, should leaders not be most circumspect in what they teach?

The next example relates to the practice of opening the Bible at random and to accept the first text on which the eyes focus as a ‘word’ from God insofar as it pertains to a specific question or problem. Haddon Robinson (1998:17, 18) indicates that this is widely practised by Christians and refers to it as ‘biblical roulette’.⁶ In a paper entitled ‘Why Pentecostals read their Bibles poorly—and some suggested cures’, one of the most respected Pentecostal leaders and Bible commentators, Gordon Fee, expresses his belief that God can take words in a text out of ‘their original context and by the Holy Spirit cause us in our circumstances to hear them as words for us’. He also adds: ‘I do indeed believe that that happens constantly’ (Fee 2004:8). However, Fee states that while he, in the same breath, acknowledges that such a ‘reading’ is not a ‘true reading’ of scripture. Although there is such a thing as God bringing a text to a Christian’s mind, as we will later see, the immediate problem is the origin of this practice and how this practice can be reconciled with the teachings of scripture.

These examples are the tip of the iceberg, but they suffice to indicate that the practice of decontextualising scripture to recontextualise it and then using it as an authoritative ‘word from the Lord’ to legitimise beliefs, decisions and actions of either oneself or those of others, has serious implications for the integrity of an individual Christian and the body of Christ. Furthermore, it creates confusion in the hearts and minds of both believers and unbelievers. We believe that the practice is

⁶ The first writer of this paper discovered a few weeks ago, during a counselling session with a Pentecostal Christian, that it is his regular practice, which is one of the main explanations for his recurrent personal problems.

based on a number of wrongful assumptions,⁷ both actual and possible, which we will now consider.

3. Using a Text as a ‘Word from the Lord’: Wrongful Assumptions

3.1. The wrongful assumption that opening the Bible at random is a legitimate way to discern God’s will

The plain truth is that the practice has a long history, is pagan in origin and is irreconcilable with the teachings of the Bible (Robinson 1998:15–19).

Over 200 years ago, in 1794, John Newton (1725–1807), pastor and writer of the well-known hymn ‘Amazing Grace’, wrote a short booklet on knowing God’s will. In it he states that the practice of opening the Bible at random to discern God’s will originated in Rome, in particular, with the reading of the writings of Virgil. Consulting it led to the expression *Sortes Virgiliana* (*sortes* being the Latin for ‘divination’), which refers to ‘the practice of divination by opening the writings of Virgil at random and accepting as divine guidance the first words the eye fell upon’ (Chapel Library, n.d.:7). Newton’s response to those who used the Bible to divine God’s will in matters concerning which it does not directly address succinctly captures the problems and dangers to which it leads.

⁷ Our discussion is in many ways complementary to and an extension of Hugh Goosen and Christopher Pepler’s (2015) paper on divine guidance for believers. We will, therefore, avoid any discussion of the traditional view of knowing God’s will. Of immediate relevance to our purposes is what they have to say about the influence of assumptions on how Christians understand divine guidance, how wrong assumptions are formed based on listening to the experiences of others and the terminology that is used to describe the experiences (Goosen and Pepler 2015:4, 22).

He wrote that people who use a text and disregard the context or duly comparing it with the general tenor of the Word of God ‘commit the greatest extravagances, expect the greatest impossibilities, and contradict the plainest dictates of common sense, while they think they have the Word of God on their side’ (Newton 1794). He also made mention of those who claim to have received divine guidance when they experience a ‘sudden strong impression of a text’ upon themselves. But, he said, experience had taught him that those who claim ‘impressions’ or ‘impulses’ are ‘unwarily misled into great evils and gross delusions [false beliefs]’. Noteworthy is his conclusion: ‘There is no doubt but the enemy of our souls, if permitted, can furnish us with Scriptures in abundance in this way, and for these purposes’ (p. 8).

The problem, as Newton correctly concluded, is that the devil does not hesitate to use and twist God’s word to tempt people into wrong beliefs, decisions and actions; he quoted God’s spoken word to Eve (Gen 3:1) and quoted the written Word of God when he tempted our Lord, the incarnate Word of God (Matt 4:4–10).

We conclude that the divining of God’s will in this manner is an evil that must be uprooted at all cost, because it opens the door for all kinds of deception.

3.2. The wrongful assumption that reasoning leads to confusion and that understanding a biblical passage is not important

There are several reasons why Christians who claim to have a ‘word from the Lord’ resist being questioned about that ‘word’ by others. One of these is arguably a deep prejudice against the use of one’s mind, reason or intellectual faculties (Nañex 2005).

Joyce Meyer (1995:82) is representative of those who believe that reasoning leads to confusion. According to her, ‘When God speaks, through his Word or in our inner man, we are not to reason, debate or ask ourselves if what He has said is logical’. She uses two pieces of evidence in support of her assertion. First she quotes Proverbs 3:5 and then concludes that it means that ‘reasoning opens the door for deception and brings much confusion’. The context, however, does not justify her conclusion. In fact, the whole book of Proverbs indicates exactly the opposite! She then follows this up with her personal ‘word from the Lord’, saying: ‘I once asked the Lord why so many are confused, and He said to me, “Tell them to stop trying to figure everything out, and they will stop being confused”’ (Meyer 1995:83). Part of the problem with this ‘word from the Lord’ is that Meyer’s beliefs are based on a faulty understanding of biblical anthropology. For example, she refers to the human spirit as an ‘organ’, that it is ‘more noble’ and to be ‘honoured above the mind’ (ibid). Scripture does not teach that. God examines the minds (Jer 17:10) as well as the hearts of people (1 Thess 2:4); he expects Christians to cleanse themselves ‘from all defilement of flesh and spirit’ in their pursuit of ‘holiness in the fear of God’ (2 Cor 7:1); he expects followers of Jesus to ‘purify their hearts’ (Jas 4:8), have their minds prepared and ready for action, and to purify their souls from sinful passions (1 Pet 1:13, 22). In other words, God is interested in the whole person, and hence, that all faculties of a person are equally important to him.

The most amazing thing is that when she gave up reasoning about what God is saying to her in her spirit, she experienced ‘withdrawal symptoms’ (Meyer 1995:85). The problem is that the ignorant reader of her words would accept that as fact, whilst it is untrue. But her belief about God speaking to her spirit, leads to a further problem: she does not tell her readers how they can distinguish between a word from the

Holy Spirit, a word from an evil spirit and a self-generated word. We will refer to this point again, for many Christians assume that they have an 'inner voice' or 'inner witness' and that it would be a good thing to listen to it as a way to discern God's will on matters the Bible does not directly address.

Davies (2009a:220) is representative of those who believe that readers of the Bible 'do not have to understand all' they read. He seems to think that that it implies 'an attempt at grasping, containing and knowing the God it reveals'. There are at least three reasons why Davies' understanding of understanding the text of the Bible should be rejected. The first reason is because understanding what one reads in the Bible has nothing to do with an attempt to contain God, for he cannot be contained at all, and there is nothing suspect or wrong about reading scripture to comprehend the Person of God or deepening one's knowledge of him (cf. 2 Peter 3:17-18).

The second reason is because he commits a logical error. Simply put, before a person can explain anything, the person must know and understand certain facts about what is to be explained. As with skills, a person may have a greater or lesser understanding of a certain object. It can also be said that a person may possess a partial or incomplete mastery of the concept that is expressed by the use of a certain word.⁸ Whereas the meaning of words involves knowing what they mean, concepts involve an understanding of their logical implications, compatibilities and incompatibilities. Take, for example, the meaning and the concept of love.⁹ At the very least, to have a proper concept of

⁸ For a discussion of the idea that a biblical 'word cannot denote a concept', see Thomas (2003:33-34). Zuck (1984:127) states that the Holy Spirit 'would not teach concepts that failed to meet the tests of truth'.

⁹ Although there are five words in Greek for the word 'love', each with a different nuance, the meaning of love in this paragraph refers to the love (*agapaō*) between

love is to understand that love is manifested in one and in one way only, and that is through touch and emotional expressions in gestures, words and sentences. It is also expressed through the actions of people. It is by observing these that knowledge of love is acquired. It is also important to understand that love has a focal point and usually focuses on a person, a place or an animal. It is to know and understand that it presupposes a capacity for love and to love; it involves feelings and it is to understand that the meaning of the word ‘love’ expresses a concept around which is clustered a variety of logically related extensions of it, such as care, understanding, encouragement, compassion, sympathy, kindness, respect and support (cf. 1 Cor 13). And it is also to understand that a person who rarely shows love is not a loving person. These are all conceptual truths which an explanation of the meaning and concept of love presupposes. In short, it is no coincidence that human abilities are bound to knowledge, understanding, learning and language. The criteria that indicate that a person has learnt and understands something consist in the person’s ability to do certain things, such as answering questions, telling others where to search for an object and explaining how something works.

This leads to the third reason why Meyer’s and Davies’ wrongful assumption about reasoning and understanding ought to be rejected: it is clearly at odds with what the Bible teaches. A few examples will illustrate the point. In John 3, Jesus said certain things to Nicodemus about the new birth that led the latter to ask, ‘How can these things be?’ (v.9). Jesus’ response to Nicodemus clearly reflects that he expected him to understand what he was talking about (v.10). When Jesus joined the travellers on the road to Emmaus, the Bible says that Jesus

husband and wife (Eph 5:25, 28, 33) and the love (*phileō*) describing affection among human beings (Matt 22:37).

‘explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures’ (Luke 24:27; cf. Philip and the Ethiopian reader of Isaiah in Acts 8:29–35). Without knowing what the scriptures says and without understanding what is expressed through its words and sentences, Jesus would not have been able to explain anything. Likewise, when Priscilla and Aquila listened to Apollos, they realised that his knowledge and understanding of the way of God was incomplete. They, therefore, ‘took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately’ (Acts 18:24–26). It is obvious that their knowledge and understanding of the way of God allowed them to spot things that needed to be corrected.

The most sobering thought about understanding or of not understanding is found in the parables and it has a direct bearing on the teachings of Jesus. When Jesus explained the parable of the sower to his disciples, the first thing he said was, ‘When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart’ (Matt 13:19). In contrast, ‘the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the man who hears the word and understand it’ and bears fruit (v. 23). It is reasonable to infer that understanding is a protective covering against the powers of the devil. But it also points to the responsibility leaders have to handle ‘accurately the word of truth’ (2 Tim 2:15).

Finally, there is Jesus’ exhortation or warning to us about listening to his teaching, which cannot be over emphasised. In Mark 4:24, he says: ‘Take care what you listen to. By your standard of measure it shall be measured to you’. The Amplified Bible puts the text as follows: ‘Be careful what you are hearing. The measure [of thought and study] you give [to the truth you hear] will be the measure [of virtue and knowledge] that comes back to you’. In other words, a reader cannot

expect to understand a lot, if anything at all, when he or she attaches little value to knowing or understanding what Jesus says through his teaching.

3.3. The wrongful assumption that a text can have more than one meaning

Evangelical scholars, such as Moisés Silva (1994:245), assert that ‘the meaning of a text should not be identified with the author’s intention *in an exclusive and absolute fashion*’ (emphasis in the original). Grant Osborne (1991:290) shares this view, although he acknowledges that the ‘Bible itself demands that we understand it on the basis of the author’s intended meaning’. For Pentecostal communities that have taken ‘a linguistic and postmodern turn’ in the reading of scripture, less and less emphasis, if it all, has been placed on the intended meaning of the human author (Arrington 1994; Nel 2015:8). Davies (2009a:222) boldly declares that Pentecostals have ‘little interest’ in the ‘surface [i.e., plain, literal] meaning of the text’ and pay ‘scant attention’ to the ‘original intention of the author’. Kenneth Archer (2015:329) states that the focus of meaning has shifted from ‘the author’s mind’ to the meaning ‘in the text’ and the meaning of the reader. For Davies (2009a:225) all this means that we have to accept that the meaning a text has for you may not be the meaning it has for me. If that is so, then there can be no objections to decontextualising a text to recontextualise it and then making it say what it was not originally meant to say.

If we are to accept that a text has multiple meanings, then we are to accept that no text has an actual meaning, but this idea is easily refuted, for every Christian knows that John 3:16 has one and only one meaning. The notion of multiple meanings also leads to the idea that two conflicting or contradictory meanings can both be true at the same time. But then, if anyone is allowed to decontextualise and recontextualise a

text, then Jesus must have been wrong to have resisted the devil's temptations by quoting scripture in context.

We submit that a text can have more than one meaning, but only when its actual meaning has been poorly or wrongly understood, has been distorted or deliberately ignored by readers. We shall, therefore, proceed and show that a Christian, especially a leader, has the responsibility to avoid all conflicting or contradicting meanings of a text. This we shall illustrate by showing how Jesus used simple logic to achieve it.¹⁰ We shall then argue that the meaning of a text is not determined by anyone's denomination or 'anointed prophets', which is contrary to what many Christians are made to believe. In fact, a whole community or denomination can be deceived. In short, we take sides with those Christians who, in the words of Walter Kaiser (1994:39), believe that 'it is the author's intended meaning that must be the starting point from which all *understanding* begins' (our emphasis; cf. Fee 1991; Friesen and Maxson 2004; Geisler and Roach 2012; Grudem 2005:19–56; Thomas 2001, 2004).

3.3.1. Avoid all contradictions

Paul's instruction to Timothy is to 'Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions [Gr. *antitheseis*] of what is falsely called knowledge' (1 Tim 6:20; NKJV). Whereas a contrast is a conflict between two possible things, a contradiction involves what is impossible. One of the laws of logic or laws of thought is known as the law of non-contradiction, which states that some assertion, statement or claim cannot be both true and false at

¹⁰ Zuck (1984:127) explains: 'The ministry of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation does not mean interpreters can ignore common sense and logic... The Holy Spirit does not guide into interpretations that contradict each other or fail to have logical, internal consistency'.

the same time in the same sense. Another law is known as the law of the excluded-middle, which states that something is either true or false. In regards to the latter, when two people make a conflicting claim about the same thing, then they can both be wrong but not both right; one has to be true and the other false.

Many people, for many years, have read Exodus 3:6— ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’—in the light of texts that refer to the burial of the bodies of those who ‘breathed’ their last on earth, and assumed that the persons referred to were deceased persons (cf. Gen 15:15, 25:8, 35:29, 49:33). The Sadducees were a category of people who based their beliefs on that assumption, but for two reasons were mistaken: a wrong understanding of scripture and an inadequate conception of the Creator (Matt 22:29). Jesus, therefore, corrected their mistaken assumption; He told them that the Creator ‘is not the God of the dead, but of the living’ (Matt 22:32). It is a claim that Jesus only could have made if Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were alive, if they had continued to exist after their bodily death on earth.

However, note that when the Sadducees asked him who, in the resurrection, will be the husband of a woman who had been married successively to seven brothers on earth, they thought that in reply Jesus had only three options open to answer their question. First, he could have denied the reality of the resurrection, and so accommodated himself to their view of reality. But he would then have contradicted himself because he already informed them of his own approaching death and resurrection from the dead (cf. Matt 12:38–42, 16:1–4). Second, Jesus could have accepted polygamy and adultery and pleaded ignorance as to whose wife she would be in heaven. But then he would have proved himself a charlatan to be ignored, for he would have

contradicted himself on what he had already taught them concerning marriage and adultery (Matt 5:27–32). Third, Jesus could have said she will be married to one brother alone, but with no grounds on which to base such a belief, thus undermining the foundation for him to say that he spoke the truth and that he came from the Father (John 8:14, 16, 18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 38, 42, 49, 54, 55). What did he do instead? He went to the essence of the matter: he corrected the false assumption that undergirded their belief, namely, that there is marriage in heaven; he backed up his statement by exposing their lack of understanding (Matt 22:29) and quoted scripture (Exod 3:6).

What can we learn from the interaction of Jesus with the Sadducees? Firstly, Jesus must have studied their theology to understand something about their beliefs. Secondly, he used his mental faculties in his debate and two simple rules of logic. And thirdly, Jesus did not decontextualise or recontextualise a text to give it a new meaning; he showed that a text has a single meaning which is none other than what it actually (literally) means.

3.3.2. The wrongful assumption that my community has authority to decide what a text means

According to Davies (2009b:309), a reader's 'Spirit-inspired message needs to resonate in a Spirit-filled community', the reason of which is to serve as a sort of preventative measure to 'misrepresentation of the meaning of a text'. Archer (2015:331) puts the same point thus: 'The Pentecostal communities must discern rightly what the Spirit is saying in and through the scriptures. The community must discern what the text means and how that meaning is to be lived out in the community'. What these writers are saying is quite correct. But what cannot be inferred is that a community has the authority to decide what a text means. The following example illustrates the gravity of the problem.

The so-called ‘Shepherding/Discipleship’ movement during the 1970s and 1980s under the leadership of five respected Bible-teachers ended on a note that should have sent a siren warning to Christians all over the world. One of these leaders, Bob Mumford, when he apologised for his role in that movement said: ‘we were leading people into deception’ which ‘resulted in unhealthy submission’ and ‘perverse and unbiblical obedience to human leaders’ (Buckingham 1990:46, 49). What makes his words so astounding is that he wrote a book in 1971 on divine guidance which he titled *Take another look at guidance: discerning the will of God*. Although the book has recently been reprinted, the question needs to be asked whether Mumford’s book contains unbiblical guidance on divine guidance. What the reader of Mumford’s book does not know is that it is based on the teachings of G Christian Weiss (1950) in *The perfect will of God*, which has also been recently reprinted. One of Weiss’ beliefs appears on page 79 of his book. He asks: ‘Is it safe to follow the leading of simply opening the Bible at random and allowing your eye to be fastened upon some certain verse or sentence?’ To which Weiss answered: ‘I believe the Holy Spirit can and does lead people in that way’. But not according to the Bible, John Newton and others (Friesen and Maxson 2004; Robinson 1998).

In retrospect we can see that their understanding of divine guidance on matters in which Christians are at liberty to exercise their own will brought shame on themselves and caused harm to thousands of Christians across the world. Mumford’s book, it must be said, could not prevent these leaders from deceiving other leaders and they, in turn, their followers. Neither could the movement’s official mouthpiece, *New Wine Magazine*, dated October 1985, do that. The ‘attention-getters’ on the front cover are most telling: ‘Guidance: How can you discover God’s will for your life’; ‘Seven ways God guides us’; ‘Successful decision-making’; and ‘Counterfeit guidance or the real thing?’. It

brings us to the next unquestioned assumption intimately related to the teachings of this movement on divine guidance.

3.4. It pays to listen to your ‘inner witness’

On page 13 of the *New Wine Magazine* referred to above, the reader will find an article by Don Basham (1985). He said in there that ‘it pays to listen’ to your ‘inner witness’ in order for divine guidance to be successful.¹¹ That this piece of advice had not worked for the leaders of the Shepherding/Discipleship movement is quite clear. But that has not deterred people from teaching it. Davies (2009b:309) makes the ‘internal witness’ of the Spirit with our spirit the ultimate adjudicator of the meaning of a text. In his words: ‘[T]he ultimate guarantor is the internal one, which’, he says, ‘cannot be faked or fabricated’ and based this assertion on Romans 8:16.

In the first place, there is not a single text in the Bible that says that a Christian should listen to an ‘inner voice’ or ‘inner witness’ to decide in matters scripture does not directly address, let alone that the ultimate authority of the meaning of a text is an ‘internal one’. It is simply misleading and nothing less than a misuse and abuse of scripture. In the second place, neither the text that he quotes nor the context makes any reference to receiving revelation or an ‘internal witness’ on the meaning of any text of the Bible (cf. DeWaay 2003:2–7; Moo 1996:503–504). The text simply states that ‘The Spirit Himself bears witness with our Spirit that we are children of God’.

¹¹ Many writers wrongly believe their ‘inner voice’ is the voice Jesus referred to in John 10:3–5, 27 (Shirer 2009:2–6). Jacobs (1995:76) states it thus: ‘When the Lord is speaking to us, an answer from within our hearts will cry, “Yes, that is God speaking to me”... This is what I mean by a witness in your spirit’.

What should we say about those, such as Graham Power, as we saw earlier, who believes that God ‘dropped’ Isaiah 66:8 ‘in his spirit’? Firstly, it is true that the Holy Spirit does remind us of scripture. We are grateful for this. It is usually to illustrate, confirm, correct our understanding or remind us about something a text or passage speaks about. But it is not at all like praying for guidance concerning a matter not directly addressed in scripture and a text such as Isaiah 30:21 then flashing into our minds: ‘This is the way, walk in it, whenever you turn to the right or to the left’. The second point is this: it is foolish not to heed what the Bible teaches about the deceptions of the heart and one’s own spirit. Jeremiah 17:9 informs us the ‘heart is more deceitful than all else’ and Proverbs 4:23 provide the following piece of advice: ‘Watch over your heart with all diligence’. We are reminded of this because God knows that his fallen human creatures have the ability to generate their own visions, dreams, inspirations, imaginings, impressions and messages and then claim them to be from him, when they are not (cf. Jer 23:16, 25–27; Ezek 13:1–10). So, how can someone distinguish between a meaning of a text generated in his or her own spirit and a meaning given by the Holy Spirit, or an evil spirit, when the deception of the heart is an ever-present reality? We submit that only scripture can adjudicate the correct meaning of a text. That is the norm against which all meanings are to be tested.

That leads to the final assumption we wish to address.

3.5. The wrongful assumption that a ‘word from the Lord’ is not open to scrutiny

It was noted at the beginning of this paper that some Christians assume that their ‘word from the Lord’ is not to be questioned by others; that they also think that neither their ‘word’ nor their claims should be explained when asked to do so. It is lamentable, because such an

attitude can in no way be legitimised by the teachings of Jesus and his apostles. Jesus warned us about false prophets and the very first thing he told his disciples when they asked him about the signs of the end-times was: ‘See to it that no one misleads you’ (Mark 13:5). It is a meaningless warning if Jesus did not expect that such things are possible. Writers, such as Ronald Enroth (1992), Hank Hanegraaf (1993; 1997) and DR McConnell (1988) have provided ample evidence to take Jesus’ teachings seriously. We should, therefore, ‘not believe every spirit’, but test (1 John 4:1) their utterances, especially those in the form of subjective (self-generated) prophecies (1 Thess 5:20–22).

It is no surprise that intellectual maturity is referred to in 1 Corinthians 13:11 which appeared between two chapters dealing with spiritual gifts. Paul says, ‘When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things’. He expresses what is both natural and important: growing up which is natural and which is part and parcel of human development. In the process of growing up it is imperative to move from a state of ignorance to a state of intellectual maturity. In the next chapter, Paul re-emphasises the same point: ‘Brethren, do not be children in your thinking ... in your thinking be mature’ (1 Cor 14:20). Mature Christians are, according to the writer of Hebrews, those who have ‘their senses trained to discern good and evil’ through constant practice (Heb 5:12–14). Thus, if Paul expected prophecies to be judged by others (1 Cor 14:29), then it becomes unthinkable that those who decontextualise and recontextualise scripture and then claiming it as a ‘word from the Lord’ are in any way exempt from being evaluated or judged.

In the final analysis, it is true that Jesus said that ‘I am with you always, even to the end of the age’ (Matt 28:20), but nowhere has he stated that

his followers will be free from being deceived by the devil, false prophets or led into error by their fellow Christians (cf. Gal 2:11–14, 3:1).

We shall next present an alternative approach to scripture and how to ascertain God’s will on matters the Bible does not directly address.

4. The Alternative View of Guidance

By ‘alternative’ we do not mean something new, as will become apparent in a moment. The approach and method rests on certain assumptions with three aims in mind. The three aims of the alternative approach are:

- To prevent a reader of scripture from decontextualising and recontextualising a text and then appropriating it as an authoritative ‘word from the Lord’ to legitimise beliefs, decisions and actions of either oneself or those of others.
- To help readers to avoid contradictions.
- To help them to distinguish between a spirit of error and truth.

4.1. The alternative: three aims

What the approach is aiming at is to prevent a reader of scripture from decontextualising and recontextualising a text and then appropriating it as an authoritative ‘word from the Lord’ to legitimise beliefs, decisions and actions of either oneself or those of others. Our approach is to help readers to avoid contradictions and to help them to distinguish between a spirit of error and truth.

4.2. Assumptions/presuppositions

4.2.1. *The place of experience in reading*

To suggest or expect that a Christian who is sincerely seeking understanding should read scripture without the guidance and interaction of the Holy Spirit or that Christians should ignore their personal experiences when reading scripture is to caricature scripture reading. It is a book, but it is more than a book. A God-centred reading motivated by the desire to understand scripture will lead to experiences of God. But such experiences should not be used as the standard against which the meaning of the biblical text is to be measured. Reading scripture is also not a game. Specifically, it is not playing hop-scotch; if a reader seeks out and listens only to those texts with which resonance is experienced, the reader will both distort the teachings of scripture and prevent it from challenging and correcting his or her experiences. Allowing scripture to interpret scripture is of utmost importance (2 Pet 1:19).

4.2.2. *The purpose of scripture*

Scripture is God's communication to us; it is written in human language and its purpose is to make God's will known and equip Christians for every good work (2 Tim 3:15–17)—not to create uncertainty (Luke 1:3–4). Its content can be understood, is to be believed and practised (James 1:23–25; 1 John 5:13). Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 'For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand' (2 Cor.1:13). Therefore, no person has the right to make it say what it was not intended to say. In the words of Milton Terry (1883:584), no reader of scripture 'has a right to foist into his expositions of Scripture his own dogmatic conceptions, or those of others, and then insist that these are an essential part of divine revelation'.

4.2.3. *Common sense*

Reading scripture presupposes a reliance on common sense to understand the plain meaning of a text, and it appeals to our rational faculties, which are enlightened by the new birth (Luke 24:45; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 1:18; cf. Fee 1991:2ff.; Thomas 2007:16–18; Zuck 1984:127).

4.3. *The method*

It is wise to read a text in light of its immediate context,¹² then in the context of the chapter and book in which it appears and then its still larger context of the whole Bible. The aims most consistent with our approach to scripture are threefold: (1) understand the author's purposes, actions, circumstances, the reasons he is saying what he says and his intended meaning;¹³ (2) understand the situation of the author's addressees, their particular problems, mistakes and needs; and (3) understand the relevance of the author's message and how to apply it to one's own situation.

The method could be compared to a building; if the foundation is poorly laid, the whole building will be unstable.

4.4. *Decision making: the way of freedom and wisdom*

Gary Friesen and Robin Maxson (2004:15) summarise God's guidance according to the way of freedom and wisdom in four simple statements:

¹² Robert Stein (2001:464, fn. 23) says, it 'is the immediate context provided by the author that ultimately determines the meaning of words, propositions, participles, etc'.

¹³ Stein (2001:462–463) discuss several advantages of a single, author-oriented meaning. Two deserve mention: (1) it is the common sense approach to all communication; (2) it prevents a reader from seeking a different divine meaning in difficult texts.

(1) where God commands, we must obey; (2) where there is no command, God gives us freedom (and responsibility) to choose; (3) where there is no command, God gave us wisdom to choose; and (4) when we have chosen what is moral and wise, we must trust the sovereign God to work out all the details for our good. We deal briefly with each of these statements.

4.1.1. Where God commands, we obey

What needs to be obeyed is God's moral will as revealed in the whole of scripture (Rom 12:2). It means that God's 'moral will' or simply 'God's will' comprises all the commands, principles and promises God has revealed in his Word. Most importantly, it is not a will that is mysterious and to be searched for until it has been 'found'—it is not hidden at all. It only needs to be read, learned and obeyed. However, God's revealed will is not restricted to outward actions; it includes our motives, desires, attitudes, plans, passions, beliefs, and thinking (cf. Exod 20:17; Rom 12:9–21; Phil 4:8).

4.1.2. Where no is no command, we are free to make responsible decisions

Concerning matters on which God has not spoken, we are free to make our own choices and are accountable for them. In different words, God-given freedom is a God-given responsibility to decide for ourselves. This means three things. Firstly, there is no 'will of God' that one could possibly miss. Secondly, a decision maker cannot blame God for his or her bad decisions (Friesen and Maxson 2004:15–16). And thirdly, it is not a sin, when in doubt, to seek the advice of wise counsellors, even if they are unbelievers (Prov 11:14, 15:22, 20:18, 24:6).

4.1.3. Where there is no command, choose wisely

Where there is no command, our freedom is limited by guidance God gives through wisdom. In the words of Friesen and Maxson (2004:16), ‘We are never free to be foolish, stupid or naïve’. We wish to define ‘wisdom’ as thinking, reasoning, reflecting, discerning, understanding and acting from Jesus’ point of view (Matt 7:24–27).

4.1.4. Decide and trust the sovereignty of God

Our responsibility is to choose and decide what is morally right and good and our actions are motivated by love for God and our neighbour (Matt 22:36–40; Rom 12:9; 1 Cor 13). When we have decided on a given course of action, we can then trust our sovereign God to work all particulars for our good (Rom 8:28; Phil 2:13).

5. Conclusion

Divine guidance is a chronic problem among Christians. Claims about divine guidance have been and are questioned not only outside the church but inside it also. The problem we have sought to address is the practice of decontextualising scripture and recontextualising it to say something it was not originally meant to say and then using it as a ‘word from the Lord’ to legitimise beliefs, decisions and actions. We have shown that the practice rests on a number of interrelated wrongful assumptions that have to be eradicated if this practice is to be prevented from opening the door to actual or potential deception by the evil one. It is our contention that many of these assumptions are based on an uncritical acceptance of the testimony of others and the terminology they use to describe these experiences.

Our approach to and reading of scripture allow scripture to interpret scripture. Together with the biblical/divine author's meaning as the standard against which all meanings are to be tested it is less open to deception.

In the final analysis, we hope to have shown that Christians have been given freedom and responsibility by God to decide for themselves on matters which scripture does not directly address. For that, he provides us with wisdom and freedom of choice.

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