

A Paradox About Hearing God

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it; yet I do not advise you to do it from that motive.

It is not pleasure which we ought to seek in this exercise; but let us do it from a principle of love, and because God would have us.

Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*



Sunday dinner was finished, but we lingered around the table, savoring the good food and reflecting on the morning's service at church. The congregation—where I then served as a very young (and very green) assistant pastor—was excited about its plans for a new sanctuary to replace its old building, which was much loved but long overused and outgrown.

The morning message had focused on the plans for the new building. Our pastor spoke of his vision for the church's increased ministry. He indicated how strongly he felt God's guidance in the way the congregation was going, and he testified that God had *spoken* to him about things that should be done.

My wife's grandmother, Mrs. Lucy Latimer ("Mema" to us all),

seemed deep in thought as we continued to chatter along. Finally, she said quietly, “I wonder why God never speaks to me like that.”

This simple comment, which came like a bolt out of the blue from the heart of this woman of unshakable faith and complete devotion, forever changed my attitude toward glib talk about God’s speaking to us or about divine guidance. Through her words—in a way I came to understand only later—God spoke to me.

I was given a vivid realization, which has never left me, of how such talk places many sincere Christians on the outside, looking in. They are not necessarily lacking the experience of hearing God, but they do not understand the language or how their experience works. This leaves them feeling confused and deficient, and may lead them to play a game that they do not really understand and that rightly makes them very uncomfortable. It undermines their confidence that they are fully acceptable to God.

Mema, in fact, had a richly interactive life with God, as we all knew. But for whatever reasons, she had not been able to relate her experience of God’s presence in her life—of which she was completely certain—to the idea of God’s speaking with her. This left her at a loss for how to deal with the *conversational* side of her friendship with God.

Up to that point I had rashly assumed that if you were really a Christian, then God spoke to you as a matter of course and you knew it. I was sure that he spoke individually and specifically about what he wanted each believer to do and that he also taught and made real to individuals the general truths all must believe in order to enter into life with him.

The Moving of God

Later I came to realize that my confidence was not based on genuine understanding. It came from my experiences in a series of revival meetings in which I was immersed as a young man. During those meetings I became accustomed to interacting with a charac-

teristic type of thought and impulse, which was to me God moving on my mind and heart. This experience was clearly marked out for me and it guided my actions, though I held no theory or doctrine about it.

Then as I subsequently grew into the ministry, I learned to wait upon “the word of God” to come to me. In the most primary of senses the word of God is simply *God’s speaking*. I also learned to expect his speaking to come through me to others. Experience taught me the remarkable difference between when it was “just me” talking, or even “just me” quoting and discussing Scripture, and when a certain something more was taking place.

Through their writings, great Christians of the past such as John Calvin and William Law offered what we might call “the ministry of Eli” to me (see 1 Sam 3:8-

9).¹ They gave me further insight into what was happening in my experiences and why it was happening.

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They helped me to identify and respond to experiences of God’s speaking, just as Eli helped Samuel in the biblical story.

They also assured me that the same Spirit who delivered the Scriptures to holy men of old speaks today in the hearts of those who gather around the written Word to minister and be ministered to. And they warned me that *only if* this happened could I avoid being just another more or less clever letter-learned scribe—trying to nourish the souls of my hearers out of the contents of my own brain, giving them only what *I* was able to work up through my own efforts from the Bible or elsewhere.

It was not easy, however, for me to see that our most sacred experiences often blind us. The light that makes it possible for us to see may also dazzle our eyes to the clearest of realities and make it impossible for us to see what lies in a shadow. Caught up in my own experiences of the workings of God’s voice, I did not

really understand it at all. I only knew its reality, and I thoughtlessly assumed it was a functioning, intelligible fact in every believer's life. Obviously, I had a lot to learn.

So for a long while I was unable to appreciate the huge problems that the idea of God's speaking to us created for some of the most faithful adherents of the church—not to mention those entirely outside it. When someone seemed to have difficulty with hearing God, I simply passed it off as a sign of weakness of faith or even rebellion on their part. Yet I could not entirely avoid being aware that many faithful, devout Christians can make no sense of being guided by God—except perhaps as it comes in the form of outright necessities imposed by force of circumstances.

I saw them driven to turn all guidance into blind force—rigidly controlling guidance—and to treat God's will as nothing but fate. And I was distressed at how often people identified some brutal event as God's will—even when it clearly came from a decision made by human beings. They then easily moved on to the faith-destroying, even blasphemous idea that everything that happens in this world is caused by God.

The Ongoing Conversation

Today I continue to believe that people are meant to live in an ongoing conversation with God, speaking and being spoken to. I believe that this can be abundantly verified in experience when rightly understood. God's visits to Adam and Eve in the Garden, Enoch's walks with God and the face-to-face conversations between Moses and Jehovah are all commonly regarded as highly exceptional moments in the religious history of humankind. Aside from their obviously unique historical role, however, they are not meant to be exceptional at all. Rather, they are examples of the normal human life God intended for us: God's indwelling his people through personal presence and fellowship. Given our basic nature, we live—really live—only through God's regular speaking in our souls and thus

“by every word that comes from of the mouth of God.”

During the time I spent writing this book, I made a special point of drawing others out in conversation concerning their experiences of hearing God. When they sensed a spirit of acceptance and understood the topic is to be dealt with seriously, then their stories began to flow. And as understanding and confidence grew, other cases came to mind that they saw to be or to contain a word from God to the individual. Many might be surprised to discover what a high percentage of serious Christians—and even non-Christians—can tell of specific experiences in which they are sure God spoke to them.

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Of course, talking to God is an almost universal practice. The words “Talking to God: An Intimate Look at the Way We Pray” covered the front of *Newsweek’s* issue for January 6, 1992. The main article was devoted to some sociological studies of the practice of prayer undertaken in the United States. “This week,” the article said, “more of us will pray than will go to work, or exercise, or have sexual relations. . . . 78 percent of all Americans pray at least once a week; more than half (57 percent) report praying at least once a day. . . . Even among the 13 percent of Americans who are atheists or agnostics, nearly one in five still prays daily.”

As these studies also found, it is widely recognized that a major part of prayer is listening to God and letting God direct us. But those who experience a directing word from God rarely speak about it. Often they have never spoken of it at all, even to their closest friends.

The UFO Syndrome

Is it not with good reason that we hesitate to speak about experi-

well-known Christians that confirm the thought that ideally we should be engaged in personal communion with God. We might well ask, “How could there be a personal relationship, a personal walk with God—or with anyone else—*without* individualized communication?”

Sometimes today it seems that our personal relationship with God is treated as no more than a mere arrangement or understanding that Jesus and his Father have about us. Our personal relationship then only means that each believer has his or her own unique account in heaven, which allows them to draw on the merits of Christ to pay their sin bills. Or possibly it means that God’s general providence for his creation is adequate to provide for each person.

But who does not think there should be much more to a personal relationship than that? A mere benefactor, however powerful, kind and thoughtful, is not the same thing as a *friend*. Jesus says, “I have called you friends” (Jn 15:15) and “Look, I am with you every minute, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20, paraphrase; cf. Heb 13:5-6).

One-to-One with God

God walks and talks in our midst as part of how the kingdom of God is in our midst (Lk 17:21). Our relationship with God is not a consumerist relationship; nor do Christians understand their faith to be a consumer religion. We don’t consume the merits of Christ or the services of the church. We are participants, not spectators. Accordingly, we seek to interact with God in a relationship of listening and speaking. Notice the interaction: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, *seek my face* and turn from their wicked ways, then *I will hear* from heaven, will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron 7:14, emphasis added). If we humble ourselves and seek God, he will respond. Such interaction is part of our friendship with God.

In the last analysis, nothing is more central to the practical life of the Christian than confidence in God's individual dealings with each person. The individual care of the shepherd for his sheep, of the parent for the child and of the lover for the beloved are all biblical images that have passed into the consciousness of Western humanity. They pervasively and essentially mark our art and general culture as well as our religion. Not only conservative and liberal Christians, high-church and Pentecostal, but also Christian and Jew, and even Jew and Muslim, come together in saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack for nothing. *He* makes me lie down in green pastures, *he* leads me beside still waters" (Ps 23:1-2, paraphrase).

The biblical record always presents the relationship between God and the believer as more like a friendship or family tie than merely one person's arranging to take care of the needs of another. If we consider that startling array of biblical personalities from Adam to the apostles Paul and John, we behold the millennia-long saga of God's invading human personality and history on a one-to-one basis. There is nothing general or secondhand about the divine encounters with Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Nehemiah, Mary or Peter.

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The saga continues up to our own day in the lives of those recognized as leaders in the spiritual life. When we consider, coming through the ages, St. Augustine, Teresa of Ávila, St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, George Fox, John Wesley, C. H. Spurgeon, Phoebe Palmer, D. L. Moody, Frank Laubach, A. W. Tozer or Henri Nouwen, we see in each case a person who regards personal communion *and* communication with God both as life-changing episodes and as daily bread. These are people who seek to focus their minds on God, to pray moment by moment. Untold thousands of

humble Christians whose names will never appear in print—who will never preach a sermon or teach a class—can testify equally well to the same kinds of encounters with God as are manifested by the great ones in the Way.

Robert C. McFarlane was a well-known businessman in the Los Angeles area. He had moved to California from Oklahoma in 1970, and within just a few days of his arrival—due to a disastrous misunderstanding with a close friend—he had to take control of an insurance agency. He did not want it, but he had to make it succeed in order to save the large amount of money he had invested in it.

By the spring of 1973 he was in the third year of constant strain and stress in the operation of the business. He had recently been converted through the influence of the Rolling Hills Covenant Church in Southern California, and in answer to the prayers of his wife, Betty, and her many Christian friends.

One day that spring the continual danger of defeat, the daylight and dark hours of effort, the frustration at every turn and the hardened memories of the cause of his financial difficulties came upon him with special force. Robert drove toward his office, facing yet another day of futility and failure but having to accomplish the absolute necessities to keep the business afloat.

Suddenly he was filled with a frantic urge to turn left onto the road out of town—and just disappear. Afterward he always felt he was going to make that turn. How far he would have gone is, of course, unknown. But into the midst of his inner turmoil there came a command: “Pull over to the curb.”

As he relates it, it was as if the words were written on the windshield. After he pulled over, there came to him, as though someone with him in the car said these words: “My Son had strains that you will never know, and when he had those strains he turned to me, and that’s what *you* should do.”

After hearing these words Robert sat at the wheel for a long

time, sobbing aloud. He then drove on to his Long Beach office, where he faced twenty-two major, outstanding problems. All the most significant problems—whether they concerned company disagreements, clients' deciding to remain with his agency, payments by clients of sizable, late premiums or whatever—were substantially resolved by that day's end.

Wilhelm Hermann, a great theologian of the late nineteenth century, goes so far as to mark the Christian out in terms of a personal communion with God. "We hold a man to be really a Christian when we believe we have ample evidence that God has revealed himself to him in Jesus Christ, and that now the man's inner life is taking on a new character through his communion with the God who is thus manifest."³ Spiritual formation into Christlikeness—true change of character—comes from living in relationship to God.

More recently the English philosopher and theologian John Baillie wrote, "Our knowledge of God rests on the revelation of his personal presence. . . . Of such a presence it must be true that to those who have never been confronted with it argument is useless, while to those who have, it is superfluous."⁴

The faith in a God who speaks personally to the soul is nowhere recorded more plainly than in the hymns of the church, from all ages, sung week by week by the church as it congregates and day by day by Christians as they go about their lives at work, at home, at play: "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us," "All the Way My Savior Leads Me," "Lead On, O King Eternal," "Where He Leads Me," "Lead Kindly Light," "He Leadeth Me," "Holy Spirit, Faithful Guide," "Jesus Savior, Pilot Me," "If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee," "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" and "Jesus, Still Lead On." This brief list hardly begins to mention all the hymns devoted to personal divine guidance and the conversational communion of the soul with God. The words of these hymns follow a familiar pattern:

He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.⁵

The Paradox

In the light of all this it is not an exaggeration to speak of a *paradox* in the contemporary experience and understanding of hearing God. This paradox seriously hinders our practical faith.

On the one hand, we have massive testimony to and widespread faith in God's personal, guiding communication with us—far more than mere providential and blindly controlling guidance. This is not only recorded in Scripture and emblazoned upon church history, but it also lies at the heart of our worship services and our individual relationships with God.

Receiving guidance from God actually serves as the basis of authority for our teachers and leaders. Rarely do people profess to teach and lead the people of God on the basis of their education, natural talents and denominational connections alone. Authority in spiritual leadership derives from a life in the Spirit, from the leader's personal encounter and ongoing relationship with God.

On the other hand, we also find a pervasive and often painful uncertainty about how hearing God's voice actually works today and what its place is in the church and in the Christian's life. Even those who firmly believe that they have been addressed or directly spoken to by God may be at a loss to know what is happening or what to do about it. In the Bible, poor flustered Gideon said to the Lord, who in some fashion stood before him, "Do something to prove that you are the one who is speaking to me!" (Judg 6:17, paraphrase).

Even if we were to beg for a word from God, we may have so little clarity on what it should be like and so little competence in dealing with it, that when it comes it will only add to our confusion. I be-

lieve that this is one reason such a word may be withheld from us by God when it would otherwise be appropriate and helpful.

Our need for understanding is clearly very great. We are all too familiar with the painful confusion of individuals who make huge efforts to determine God's will for themselves—people who are frequently very sincere and devout. We see them make dreadful errors by following a whim or chance event that, because of their desperation, they *force* to serve as a sign from God. We see them sink into despair, skepticism, even cynicism, often accompanied by a continuation of religious routine that becomes utterly mechanical and dead. They “know,” on the basis of what has happened to them, that for all practical purposes they are simply “on their own.”

We are also all too familiar, even if only through newspaper accounts, with the tragic domination of groups by those who lay claim to a special sign or word from God. Religious dictators are in unceasing supply and show up in surprising guises and places. Often they are not effectively resisted precisely because the other members of the group have no clear idea, tested and proven in experience, of how such a word from God really works. They are vulnerable to madness in the name of God.

First Steps Toward a Solution

As disciples of Jesus Christ, I believe we cannot abandon faith in our ability to hear from God. To abandon this is to abandon the reality of a personal relationship with God, and that we must not do. Our hearts and minds, as well as the realities of the Christian tradition, stand against it.

The paradox about hearing God's voice must, then, be resolved and removed by providing believers with a *clear understanding* and a *confident, practical orientation toward God's way of guiding us and communicating with us*, which is the aim of the chapters that follow. But before we can even begin working on this task, there are

three general problem areas that must be briefly addressed.

First, *we need to understand that God's communications come to us in many forms.* What we know about guidance and the divine-human encounter from the Bible and the lives of those who have gone before us shows us that. We should expect nothing else, for this variety is appropriate to the complexity of human personality and cultural history. And God in redeeming humanity is willing to reach out in whatever ways are suitable to its fallen and weakened condition. We should look carefully at these many forms to see which ones are most suited to the kind of relationship God intends to have with his people. If we give primacy to forms of communication that God does not on the whole prefer in relation to his children, that will hinder our understanding of and cooperation with his voice—perhaps even totally frustrating his will for us. One of the main tasks of the chapters that follow is to prevent this.

Second, *we may have the wrong motives for seeking to hear from God.* We all in some measure share in the general human anxiety about the future. By nature we live in the future, constantly hurled into it whether we like it or not. Knowing what we will meet there is a condition of our being prepared to deal with it—or so it would seem from the human point of view. Francis Bacon's saying that knowledge is power is never more vividly realized than in our concern about our own future. So we ceaselessly inquire about events to come. The great businesses and the halls of government are filled today with experts and technocrats, our modern-day magicians and soothsayers. A discipline of "futurology" has emerged within the universities. The age-old trades of palm reading and fortune telling flourish.⁶

Within the Christian community this leads to a prominence of teaching on the will of God and how to know it. Russ Johnston draws upon his own wide experience to remark how this continues to be one of the most popular subjects,

of the world. But his direct communication with us, by word and by shared activity, is the most important part. This is because we are to become the temple of God, one that actively understands and cooperates with God's purposes, one that is inhabited through a willing, clear-eyed identification of ourselves with Jesus Christ.

That's why it is Christ *in us* that is our hope of glory (Col 1:27). Paul attempts to capture this paradoxical reality in the following well-known statement: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:19-20).

The interpretation of these and similar passages from Scripture given earlier is not something that has only recently come to light. Such an understanding is not my solitary brainstorm. It represents the mainstream of Christianity throughout the ages, though this understanding must be renewed constantly. You may wish to compare what you have just read to the section "Several Manners of Divine Presence" in Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living*, which will give a sense of the solidarity of what I have said here with what has been taught in past times.¹¹

Mistaken Views of How God Speaks to Us

To conclude this chapter, let us examine three commonly accepted interpretations of how God speaks to us (including how he gives us guidance) that are surely mistaken. They are harmful to our efforts to live a life in which we hear God and receive his guidance.

A message a minute. According to the first view, God is either telling you what to do at every turn of the road *or* he is at least willing and available to tell you if you would only ask him.

I do not believe that either the Bible or our shared experience in the Way of Christ will substantiate this picture. There is no evidence in the life of Peter or Paul, for example, that they were *constantly* receiving communications from God.

The union Christ had with the Father was the greatest that we can conceive of in this life—if indeed we can conceive of it. Yet we have no indication that even Jesus was constantly awash with revelations as to what he should do. His union with the Father was so great that he was at all times obedient.

This obedience was something that rested in his mature will and understanding of his life before God, not on always being told “Now do this” and “Now do that” with regard to every detail of his life or work.

Putting it this way returns us to the idea that *God speaks ultimately to the mature Christian*. This is not to say that people at the time of conversion—or as they first enter the church or begin to come alive in their experience of God—do not receive words from him. God meets us where we are. Yet God’s working through the Holy Spirit and the indwelling Christ to speak to us is not to keep us constantly under his dictation. Too much intrusion on a seed that has been planted, as on the life of a plant or a child, simply makes normal, healthy growth impossible.

Thus E. Stanley Jones helpfully observes,

I believe in miracle, but not too much miracle, for too much miracle would weaken us, make us dependent on miracle instead of our obedience to natural law. Just enough miracle to let us know He is there, but not too much, lest we depend on it when we should depend on our own initiative and on His orderly processes for our development.¹²

A redemptive community consists not of robots but of mature people who know how to live together and who know how to live with God. For that reason I think this model of a message a minute is mistaken and very harmful in our efforts to hear God. Extensive observations of individuals who *try* to live with this model, or at least profess to, show that they simply cannot do it and that any sustained effort to do so leads quickly to disaster.

Of course, the question is not whether God *could* give a message every minute. Surely he could do that. He could give ten or a thousand messages a nanosecond—even more, if that would suit his purpose of bringing forth the cosmic family of God. But it does not. Sometimes we get caught up in trying to glorify God by praising what he can do, and we lose sight of the practical point of what he actually does do.

The Bible will not tell you which song you are supposed to sing next Sunday.

All of this must be kept in mind as we develop educational programs and worship services, and carry on the other activities of the church. In our services and in our models both of ministry and of pastors, we must remember that we are not making robots who sing, clap, pray, give and show up for meetings when they are supposed to. We are bringing forth the sons and daughters of God to live their unique lives in this world to his glory. We must do all we can to suit the means we employ to that end.

It's all in the Bible. I believe this second view, that it is all in the Bible, is seriously misguided and very harmful. It intends to honor the Bible, but it does so with a zeal that is not according to knowledge (Rom 10:2).

The Bible gives direct instructions about many situations in our lives. We do not need to make long inquiries into God's will in order to know whether we should worship an idol, take something that is not ours, engage in illicit sex or mistreat our parents. But other questions force us to realize that many of life's specific circumstances are not dealt with in the Bible.

The Bible will not tell which song you are supposed to sing next Sunday or which verse you should take as a text for a talk or a sermon. Yet it is very likely that God's special leading is claimed for nothing more frequently than for the selection of texts and sermon topics.

Neither will the Bible tell you what to do with most of the details of your life. Suppose you want to know how to raise your children. It will tell you some very important things but not everything you need and want to know on that subject. Your family, your work and your community will present you with many choices and issues about which the Bible simply says nothing.

The *principles* are all there, however. I happily insist that the Bible says all that needs to be said or can be said, so far as principles are concerned. But the principles have to be applied before they can be lived out, and it is largely at the point of application that almost everything imaginable has been “proven” from the Bible. In these instances people have found applications they desperately desire by scandalously loosening principles of proof.

Our reverence for and faith in the Bible must not be allowed to blind us to the need for personal divine instruction *within* the principles of the Bible yet *beyond* the details of what it explicitly says. A distinguished minister once said on television that if we would only accept the Bible as the Word of God, all differences between Christians would be resolved. But in fact it is Bible-believing Christians who disagree with each other most often and most heatedly.

Nearly every faction in Christendom claims the Bible as its basis but then goes on to disagree as to what the Bible says. An exalted view of the Bible does not free us from the responsibility of learning to talk with God and to hear him in the many ways he speaks to humankind.

A misguided expectation of the Bible’s ability to speak specifically to an individual or a situation leads some people to play the Bible roulette mentioned earlier. They allow the Bible to fall open where it will and then stab their finger at random on the page to see which verse it lands on. Then they read the selected verse to see what they should do. This is trying to force God to give you a message.

Despite the fact that some great Christians have used this technique, it is certainly not a procedure recommended by the Bible, and there is no biblical reason why one might not just as well use a dictionary, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* or the newspaper the same way or simply open the Bible and wait for a fly to land on a verse.

A novel approach was recently suggested by a minister who stated in all seriousness that we should look up the year of our birth to cast light on what we should do. Unless you were born in the first half of the twentieth century (the earlier the better), this method will do you no good, since there are few verses numbered beyond 20 or 30. I was born in 1935, so I thought I would see what direction I could get from Genesis 19:35. I will leave it to your curiosity to see what that verse says, but I shudder to think what instruction might be derived from this method.

Of course, God is so great that he sometimes does use almost anything you can imagine for his purposes in the life of a person who sincerely seeks him. Even truly superstitious methods are not beyond his forbearance and use. But that does not certify them as methods chosen by him for the spiritual life.

In the upper room, lots were cast—akin to flipping a coin or drawing straws—to determine who would replace Judas among the twelve apostles (Acts 1:26). This method was often used in biblical times, and Proverbs 16:33 assures us that while the lot is cast into the lap, “the decision is the LORD’s alone.” Even the most biblically oriented churches of today would not think of rolling dice or flipping a coin to determine a policy for the church or to settle an issue in someone’s life. This is true even though all might agree that God *could* determine the coin or the dice to come out as he wished.

So we have made some progress. Nevertheless, you hear people tell of opening the Bible at random and reading a verse to decide whether to undertake some enterprise or move or to marry a certain person. Many devout people will do such things to hear God because their need and anxiety to hear God is so great—though

they may later try to hide it or laugh at it when revealed. Worse still, many actually act on the fruit of this “guidance” to the great harm of themselves and others. They are the losers at Bible roulette. What a stark contrast to this unhappy condition is the simple word of Jesus: “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me” (Jn 10:27). We have problems when we try to force God to tell us something. We don’t force a conversation. We respect and wait and listen.

Whatever comes is God’s will. This third mistaken view of how God speaks is commonly adopted and has much to recommend it in terms of the peace of mind and freedom from struggle that it provides. But, in fact, it amounts to giving up any possibility of a *conscious* interchange between God and his children.

The view even shows up in some beloved hymns such as “If Thou but Suffer God to Guide Thee.” It may seem to be about exactly what we are talking about: allowing God to guide us. But when we study the hymn closely we find it counsels us to accept *everything* that happens as the guidance of God.

If you wish to know what God would have you do, it is no help at all to be told that whatever comes is his will. For you are at that moment in the position of deciding what is to come. Does it mean that *whatever* you do will be God’s will? I certainly hope not.

If Moses had accepted this view, there would have been no nation of Israel. Perhaps there would have been a nation of “Mosesites” instead. When the people made and worshiped the golden calf while Moses was on Sinai receiving God’s commandments, God said to him, “Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation” (Ex 32:10). Not only did Moses not accept whatever came, he actually and successfully withstood God’s own declared intent in the matter, appealing to God’s reputation before the surrounding nations and to his friendship with Abraham. “And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he had planned to bring on his people” (Ex 32:14).

to the Bible itself—is available independently of the Bible and the church. Hence they too would not be “needed”—yet here they are. For as Paul states in Romans 1:19-21:

What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.

However, if by what is “needed” we mean what is required for a truly redemptive, personal *relationship* between God and the individual, then the existence of the Bible and the church is certainly not enough. In addition to merely being there, they must at least have an individualized function in the life of each person. And in order for this to happen they—both the church and the Bible—must become the means through which God personally and uniquely addresses each individual.

Referring to the question, “Were not the miracles and gifts of the Spirit only for the apostolic church?” Andrew Murray replied,

Basing my views on scripture, I do not believe that miracles and the other gifts of the Spirit were limited to the time of the primitive Church, nor that their object was to establish the foundation of Christianity and then disappear by God’s withdrawal of them. . . . The entire scriptures declare that these graces will be granted according to the measure of the Spirit and of faith.¹²

Murray further dismisses the idea that such a particularized presence of the hand of God was necessary only in the early days of Christianity: “Ah, no! What about the power of heathenism today wherever the gospel seeks to combat it, even in our *modern*