

Follow God's Will (and Never Mind the Mystery)

Scripture: Ephesians 5:17–18; 1 Timothy 2:3

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Like the dripping of water over centuries, the persistent influence of charismatic theology over many decades seems to have whittled away and reshaped the evangelical commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture. Perhaps other forces are at work as well—secularism, consumerism, multi-culturalism—but modern evangelicals seem less willing to confine themselves to the 66 books of the canon.

As we pointed out in [our opening post](#), an increasing number of popular pastors and leaders today claim to follow God's will through divine impressions, visions, and dreams. It's common to hear them say, "God told me to _____," or, "God lead me to _____," especially when it involves a major life decision or a strategic ministry direction. Even more troubling is when the divine imprimatur is connected with questionable, foolish, or even sinful ways of living and doing ministry.

We're concerned about that. Why? Because we want to pick a fight with "godly men"? No, not at all. Our concern is pastoral. We love the church of God and want to reach it with divine truth, particularly when it comes to making decisions.

When a pastor or ministry leader (or anyone, really) uses the phrase, "God told me to do thus and such," he is going beyond what he can legitimately claim. Speaking that way becomes contagious, and it's not helpful—it often causes great distress and confusion in the spiritual lives of regular folks.

Someone who says, "God told me to _____" might as well say, "Thus saith the Lord (to me)." If he's prepared to be that bold, then he bears a huge burden of proof. No one should believe him or follow him until he proves it. But if a pastor is not prepared to be that bold, then he should stick with, "This is what the Word of God teaches, and this is what I think I should do," or, "This is what I want to do, based on what God's Word says."

That humble approach bears witness to a number of important truths—(1) because we are limited and fallible, we often make mistakes; (2) we are utterly dependent on God and His revealed Word; and (3) the Scripture is our only infallible guide and is absolutely sufficient.

When a decision we make works out well, great—all glory and praise be to God. And when we decide to do something that turns out to be the wrong thing to do, well, we bear the burden of responsibility for our own error. But be wary of those who try to put God's stamp of approval on their own desires, methodologies, plans, and strategies. Don't be afraid to question it.

As Christian leaders, we need to recognize that the methodology we practice must be consistent with the theology we profess. What we do is just as influential as what we teach.

That's what I've always appreciated about John MacArthur and his approach to ministry. He's

concerned about the level of consistency between what he preaches and how he lives. He realizes he bears the tremendous burden of influence, for which he is accountable to the Great Shepherd of the sheep. After all, it's Jesus who said, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6).

So, don't let what John did in this series escape your notice. John said that as long as you are saved, Spirit-filled, sanctified, submissive, suffering, and saying thanks, you can do whatever you want. Where did John come up with that list? The Bible. Here John's list again, just in case you missed it:

Saved – "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3). "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Spirit-Filled – "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:17-18).

Sanctified – "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

Submissive – "Submit yourselves therefore to God" (James 4:7). "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is...be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ephesians 5:17, 21). "Obey your leaders, and submit to them" (Hebrews 13:17). "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution . . . for such is the will of God" (1 Peter 2:13, 15).

Suffering – "For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong" (1 Peter 3:17). "Let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" (1 Peter 4:19).

Saying Thanks – "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). "And be thankful" (Colossians 3:15).

John has followed an important principle in his investigation of how to follow God's will—stick to what God has revealed in Scripture, and don't deviate from it.

That principle is as old as Moses—"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but *the things revealed* belong to us and to our sons forever, *that we may observe* all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29, emphasis mine). And that principle governed Paul's model of ministry, what he passed on to his churches—"Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn *not to exceed what is written*, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other" (1 Corinthians 4:6, emphasis mine).

As you saw in John's final point—do whatever you want—there's a tremendous amount of freedom in restricting yourself to what God has said in Scripture.

So, never mind the "mystery" of trying to listen to God's voice; don't feel bad if you're not in this "really exciting place" of wondering what God is saying to you—there's no virtue in confusion and uncertainty. You can know the will of God for your life from Scripture. You can follow God's will by

obeying what He has written.

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