

Thy Ways, O Lord, With Wise Design

Ambrose Serle (1742–1812)

Thy ways, O Lord, with wise design,
Are framed upon thy throne above,
And every dark or bending line,
Meets in the center of thy love.

With feeble light, and half obscure,
Poor mortals thy arrangements view,
Not knowing that they all are sure,
And, tho' mysterious, just and true.

Thy flock, thy own peculiar care,
Tho, now they seem to roam un-eyed,
Are led by power and goodness where
They best, and safest may abide.

They neither know nor trace the way,
But guided by they piercing eye,
None of their feet to ruin stray,
Nor shall the weakest fail or die.

My favored soul shall meekly learn,
To lay her reason at thy throne;
Too weak thy secrets to discern,
I'll trust thee for my guide alone.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Knowing God's Will: Part Eight

Kevin T. Bauder

If God has an individual direction for His children, then they ought to be able to discern what that direction is. Many Christians believe that the way to find God's will is to pay attention to a kind of subjective inner sense, a feeling of peace that will indicate the decision that God wants them to make. They think that they find this way of knowing God's will in Colossians 3:15, which commands us to let the peace of God (or peace of Christ) rule in our hearts. As they note, the word *rule* is a term that means to *umpire* or *decide*. Consequently, they presume that God leads them through the sense of peace that He gives them.

Others have objected that such leading would be equivalent to extra-Scriptural revelation. Therefore, they reject the notion that God creates subjective impressions at all. They insist that believers must rely solely upon the written Word of God.

I agree that the written Scriptures must be the Christian's only source of spiritual authority, but I think this objection is overstated. Most believers at most times have acknowledged that God can somehow prompt subjective impressions that do not rise to the level of revelation. For example, Calvin argued that one essential component in the recognition of canonicity is the inner witness of the Spirit. Others rely upon the convicting ministry of the Spirit when they witness to unbelievers. Most recognize that some subjective ministry is involved when the "Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16). Efforts to deny that an inner, subjective working of the Holy Spirit is depicted in this verse are not convincing.

Very likely, God can work through inner, subjective impressions. He probably does. Still, I think that the appeal to Colossians 3:15 is a bit hasty, especially considering the rest of the verse. After the verse says to let the peace of God rule in your hearts, it adds, "to which [peace] also ye are called in one body." In other words, the peace that Paul is writing about to the church in Colosse is not an inner sensation. It is an outward manner of relating to other believers in the church. The peace of God is to govern our hearts *as we carry out our Christian relationships*.



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While God is capable of producing inner sensations in the believer, including the sensation of peace, basing one's decisions primarily or only upon that sensation is not justified by an appeal to Colossians 3:15. Believers who make this subjective, inner sense the primary or only way of discerning God's direction are asking for trouble. God *can* prompt inner sensations, but He does not promise that He will. To rely upon something that God has not promised is simply presumptuous. It is a form of tempting God.

This problem is compounded by the fact that subjective impressions come from many sources other than God. Our inner sensations are affected by how tired or hungry we are, by what we eat, and by the stresses that we may be under. We have no way of saying with certainty whether a particular sense of inner leading is coming from God or from too much cabbage.

In view of these facts, should we recognize any role at all for subjective considerations such as feelings and promptings when seeking the Lord's direction? My answer to that question is *yes*, but it is a qualified yes. We should take account of such things, but subject to three limitations.

First, while God can produce feelings and sensations within people, He need not do so by acting directly upon the soul. Rather, these feelings and promptings may be (and usually are) produced providentially. God uses secondary agencies to move our consciences and affections. These secondary agencies include the kinds of things that we have previously discussed: Scripture, duties, counsel, circumstances, and so forth. The human mind has the capability of sifting, combining, and evaluating such matters very rapidly at a level beneath conscious deliberation. We can intuit conclusions without really being aware of how we draw them, and this intuition sometimes gives us a sense of the right choice.

I believe that God can use exactly this process in producing a sense of His leading within His people. This sense is not miraculous and it does not involve the direct action of God upon the soul, but through secondary agencies God really is leading. Since it is providential, however, and since it involves an element of human interpretation, this sense must never be taken as infallible—and that is the second limitation. As with other factors, our subjective sense of God's leading needs to be evaluated, weighed, and considered. It is not a form of divine revelation.

The fact that this sense is not revelation leads to the third limitation. We should not seek God's leading primarily through subjective impressions and inner sensations. We should take them into account, but they should rarely be the determining factor when seeking God's will. The inner sense of peace can certainly help to assure us that we are on the right path, but it does not take the place of the other factors. We ought to use these inner, subjective impressions for confirmation, not information.

In other words, I am trying to stake out a middle ground on this issue. We should not ignore our subjective impressions about God's leading since such feelings may come from God, and even if they do not they may represent good intuitions. On the other hand, we must not treat respond to these feelings as if they were a sure revelation of God's will, since we recognize that they can also come from other sources. Avoiding both extremes, we can legitimately consider our subjective impression of God's leading as one factor among several, and we should consider these impressions only after we have carefully weighed all other considerations.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
