

Leaders Must Listen to God: Understanding God's Will Through the Word of God

By Bob Young

Spiritual leaders must listen to God. If the leaders of the church are not listening to God, it is unlikely that the members are listening to God. Listening to God requires spending time with God—understanding his will through his Word, and prayerfully spending time in his presence. A prerequisite to understanding God's will is to know his Word. Without knowledge of God's Word, how will a leader, or any Christian, discern which of the multitude of voices in today's religious milieu is the voice of God?

To be effective, the spiritual leader must depend on God. Effective spiritual leadership—leading others in evangelism, discipling others, and Christian living—requires listening to God and following his instructions. Leaders cannot lead their followers to do what they themselves are not doing. The leader must be led before the leader can lead. A leader who confidently listens to God's instructions and follows them will develop a strong spiritual life. Such leaders are effective examples and are able to help others hear and obey God.

Therefore, leaders must ask, "Am I listening to God's will? How can I hear the voice of God?" Many Christians have the same questions. Some who are not Christians want to know how to hear God. In today's religious world, many people expect God to speak to them through signs, dreams, visions, angels, or those who claim to be prophets. All things are possible for God, but in careful study of the Bible we find that such means never were God's usual way of revealing his will. Rather, we find that God gave people His Word so people could understand and do his will. In the New Testament, we see that the Holy Spirit was charged with the inspiration and delivery of the Word. Until the written Word was available, the Holy Spirit worked to communicate God's will apart from a written Word, primarily through human beings.

Two biblical texts help us understand how to know we are listening to God's voice.

Romans 8:1-14 explains two things: what it means to live according to the Spirit and what it means to be led by the Spirit of God. Paul develops the two concepts synonymously. Being led by God, by the Spirit of God, brings adoption and freedom from sin rather than slavery, powerlessness, and fear. One knows that one is led by the Spirit when one lives according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh. Romans 8 does not explain how this happens but Paul's reference to the pattern of teaching in the same overall context (Rom. 6:17) suggests that being led by the Spirit means following the teachings of the Spirit. In Romans 8, being led by the Spirit of God is not about supernatural and mysterious guesswork. We know we are listening to God's voice and are being led by His Spirit when we follow His teachings—the teachings of God's Word.

Ephesians 5:15-21 teaches that a Christian is filled with and controlled by the Holy Spirit. How is that control or influence exercised? Biblically, the answer always has to do with words (and the Word). Control over human beings is exercised by influencing the mind or thinking. We human beings act based on what we think. You can influence me by changing my thinking. Why would we understand that the influence of the Holy Spirit would somehow be different, that it would come to us mysteriously, supernaturally, or miraculously? How does God influence us? Through his words (his Word). Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Let the Word dwell in you abundantly." We Christians are filled with the Holy Spirit and are able to control our actions.

These two texts describe Christians in three parallel phrases. Those who live in the Spirit, those who are led by the Spirit, those who are filled with the Spirit, are obedient. Galatians 5 says that those who walk in the Spirit do not fulfill the works of the flesh. Listening to God's voice through his Word and obeying his will is an essential part of genuine Christianity.

Developing spiritual discernment—the ability to discern and understand the will of God through reading the Bible—is the key to knowing his will and following it. A leader who develops the habit of spending time in God's Word will have little trouble discerning the voice of God. Like any habit, constant repetition is needed until it becomes an irreplaceable part of life. Time in the Word is essential. A person who does not devote significant time to the Word of God will be hard pressed to recognize the authentic leading of God's Spirit, will be inclined to see the leading of the Spirit where it does not exist, and will be less than effective as a spiritual leader who brings people into God's presence and will.