God's Will and Impressions

There is a common belief among Christians today that God uses impressions, feelings, and promptings to reveal His will and guide His people. By impressions, feelings, and promptings, I mean an internal thought, urge, sense, or feeling that one should speak or act a certain way. In many Christians' understanding, the Holy Spirit guides believers by giving them such impressions so that they might know what God wants them to do in certain situations. Phrases such as "I felt God leading me," "God spoke to my heart," "God impressed upon me," etc., are quite common in Christian vocabulary today. In fact, some Christians rely on this type of "relationship" with God for much of their decisions and actions throughout the day.

When I look to God's Word, however, I do not see any indication that God either commands Christians to follow such impressions or even that God uses impressions or feelings to reveal His will or give guidance. While I do not question at all the sincerity of those that would say God uses impressions to guide or speak to them, I would graciously call them to test what they believe in light of God's Word. The following is my attempt to articulate what the Bible says about how God does lead and speak to Christians today, and how we as Christians should respond when we do have impressions and feelings of the nature we have been discussing.

How Does God Speak?

- **GENERAL REVELATION** - One of the most fundamental truths we believe as Christians is that God has revealed Himself to people. The Bible indicates that God has revealed Himself in two ways: the first way God has revealed Himself to man is through the creation. This is called "general revelation." Psalm 19:1 declares that "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (ESV). Romans chapter one helps us to understand the nature of general revelation: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (1:18-20, ESV). This tells us that general revelation is enough to hold man accountable for knowing that God exists, but is not enough to save man from his sins. While general revelation is not a way in which God speaks, it is none-the-less a "general" way that He reveals Himself.

- **SPECIAL REVELATION** - The second way God has revealed Himself to man is through special revelation, which is much more direct that general revelation. The creation testifies of God generally and indirectly, the way a painting might reveal an artist. Special revelation is when God directly and verbally (audibly or written)
speaks to man. While the first half of Psalm 19 speaks of general revelation (vv. 1-6), the second half (vv. 7-11) speaks of this special, direct revelation: "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (vs. 7, NASB). It is through special revelation that man learns about God's character, man's sin, God's standard, and the plan God has to save the world from their sins through Jesus Christ. So now we ask the question: how does God speak in special revelation?

✓ **IN THE OLD TESTAMENT** - The book of Hebrews is a great place to start as we attempt to see how God has spoken. Hebrews 1:1-2 says: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (NASB). In the past (Old Testament), God revealed Himself to man through prophets in many different ways such as: visions, dreams, an angel or the angel of the Lord, or a voice from heaven or a cloud, etc. Other times, the Bible just says, "the word of the Lord came to the prophet... saying." But what we can observe consistently is that when God spoke, it was just that: God speaking. God reveals Himself with words in language. That is what "speaking" means. Regardless of the many contexts and ways God used, the prophet always knew exactly what God had said. There was no question. And these very words are what are recorded for us in the Old Testament.

✓ **IN THE NEW TESTAMENT** - Hebrews goes on to say that God spoke in these last days through His Son. The language used indicates that this is a "once and for all" revelation, meaning we should not expect God to speak beyond what He revealed in Christ. In the New Testament, Christ is revealed through the pen of His apostles, just as Jesus Himself promised (John 14:26).

➢ **IMPRESSIONS AND LANGUAGE** - What might be surprising at this point is to note that even among the different means in which God spoke, we never once observe an example of God "revealing" or "speaking" through an impression or feeling. In fact, the very idea of a feeling, impression, or sense is incompatible with the idea of language and speaking. Speech is something objective and concrete, made up of words and syntax that mean something. An impression or feeling is by its very nature subjective, uncertain, and void of any concrete meaning. And impressions or feelings are simply not the same as words and language. Even trying to put the same feeling "into words" may produce very different results between different people. While the Bible does not always reveal the mechanics of how God inspired the writers of the Old and New Testaments, what we do know is that what they wrote were exactly God's words (2 Tim. 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:21). Again, the Bible talks about God "speaking," using words and language, not feelings or impressions. There is absolutely no mandate nor example in all of Scripture where God uses an impression or
feeling to "speak" or "communicate" to man. This is worth stressing because Christians often assume the opposite is true.³

GOD SPEAKING TODAY - What about today? If God spoke "once and for all" in His Son, and the New Testament is the complete fulfillment of that verse, does God continue to speak to us today? The answer is: only through the Bible. The Bible is God's very word. It is the complete account of what He has already spoken. When Christians read the Bible, they are reading what God has said. The "written Word of God" is how God "speaks" (it might be less confusing to say "communicates") to Christians today. In some senses, reading the Bible may seem less personal than if God audibly spoke to us, the way reading a letter from a friend may seem less personal than speaking to that friend on the phone. But don't miss this point: It is no less God communicating just because it is written. It may seem less personal, but it is certainly no less God's very words, speech, and message.⁴ And unlike reading a letter from a friend, the Bible says God's Holy Spirit works through God's Word such that it radically transforms our life as we renew our minds and apply what it says (Heb. 4:12, Rom. 8:13-14, 12:1-2, Gal. 5:16-25, Eph. 5:17 with Col. 3:16, etc.). That is why the Bible is "living and active," because it is the vehicle that the Spirit uses to work in our lives.

This leads us to our next question: How does the Holy Spirit fit into all of this?

How Does the Spirit Lead and Guide Believers?

The Holy Spirit is thought of by many to be the more mysterious Person of the three in the Godhead. And indeed, what the Bible does reveal about the Holy Spirit may leave our "picture" of who He is a little more fuzzy than the Father or the Son. But even though that is true, the Bible does tell us a lot about who He is, how He works, and specifically what His role is in teaching, leading, and guiding Christians.

HE IS A PERSON - The first note we should make about the Holy Spirit is that He is just that: a He. The Holy Spirit is not an "it," or a "thing," or a "force." The Holy Spirit is a person, just as much as the Father and Son are also persons. For example, He is always referred to as a "He," never "it." He has many characteristics of personality, such as life (2 Cor. 3:3, Rom. 8:2), intelligence (Is. 11:2, 40:13), freedom and purpose (1 Cor. 12:11), liberty (2 Cor. 3:17), love (Rom. 15:30), and knowledge (1 Cor. 2:11). He displays actions of personality such as speaking, interceding, commanding, teaching, testifying, reproving, guiding, and praying (Acts 8:29, 10:19, 13:2, Rom. 8:15, 26, 1 Cor. 2:13, John 15:26, 16:8). The Bible also explains that certain acts can be done toward Him which require Him to be a person. For example, He can be obeyed, lied to, resisted, vexed, grieved,

This basic truth about the Spirit helps us a great deal in understanding how the Holy Spirit interacts with believers. A lot of the confusion regarding how the Holy Spirit works today comes from a misunderstanding that He is more of a "force" or even a "feeling" than a person. But knowing that He is a person helps us a great deal. A person does not communicate or speak to another person through impressions or feelings. Rather, a person speaks or communicates using words and language, which is how the Spirit speaks (Acts 8:29, 10:19, 13:2).5

- **HE IS THE AUTHOR OF SCRIPTURE** - The second observation we should make about the Holy Spirit is that He is revealed as the author of Scripture (2 Peter 1:20-21, 2 Samuel 23:1-2, John 14:16-17, 26, 16:26-27, 16:13). 2 Peter 1:21 says that men were "moved" by the Holy Spirit such that they wrote down God's very words. We have already seen the different ways in which God revealed Himself to the prophets, but now we understand how those prophets were able to write down exactly what they had heard God speaking. The Holy Spirit was controlling them. He is the author of Scripture. In fact, it is worth noting that the work of the Holy Spirit is always linked to the Word of God in Scripture (for example, Eph. 5:17 and Col. 3:16, John 17:17 and Eph. 5:26 with 2 Thes. 2:13 and Rom. 15:16, etc.)

- **HE IS THE CONVICTOR** - Third, the Holy Spirit brings about conviction of sin through God's Word (John 16:8). In other words, the Holy Spirit works when people read or hear the Bible to convict people of their sins (1 Thes. 1:5, James 2:8-9, 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

- **HE IS THE ILLUMINATOR** - A fourth, an exceedingly important observation in our discussion is that the Holy Spirit is the illuminator of the Bible (1 Cor. 2:14-16). Illumination means the inner capacity of Christians to understand God's truth. And the Bible says that without the Holy Spirit, people do not have the capacity or ability to understand the Scripture. The Bible also says that because of this illumination, the Holy Spirit is ultimately the real teacher when one hears or reads the Bible (1 John 2:20, 27). As one author reminds, "The doctrine of illumination does not mean we can know and understand everything (Deut. 29:29), that we do not need human teachers (Eph. 4:11-12), or that study is not hard work (2 Tim. 2:15). It does mean that Scripture can be understood [because of the Holy Spirit] by every Christian who is diligent and obedient."6

- **HE IS THE AGENT OF RIGHTEOUS LIVING** - Finally, the Bible reveals that the Holy Spirit is the "agent" of righteous living (Gal. 5:16-26, Rom. 8:1-17). This means that once the Holy Spirit has illuminated the text such that believers can understand it, He then gives the believer the ability to obey Scripture. He
sanctifies believers into the image of Christ, meaning that He enables them to repent of sin and produce real righteousness and spiritual fruit. When a believer, by the Holy Spirit's power, repents of sinful deeds and instead produces good works and spiritual fruit, the Bible says that person is "being led by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:18-24, Rom. 8:13-14). Being led by the Spirit does not mean that believers experience and inward impression or feeling that they should act a certain way or make a certain decision. That idea is simply foreign to Scripture. The phrase "being led the Spirit" does not describe a process of how a Christian should live, it is merely another way to describe one whose life is characterized by spiritual fruit.

**JESUS & THE SPIRIT'S LEADING** - Both Luke and Matthew record that Jesus "was led" by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1, Luke 4:1). Mark says that Jesus "was impelled" by the Spirit (Mark 1:12). All three verses use a different word to describe what the Spirit did with Jesus, which actually makes the nature of this "leading" quite helpful. None of these words even hint that this was an impression, prompting, or feeling that the Spirit produced in Jesus. The language merely states the fact of the action, rather than describing it. The Spirit simply told Jesus (no doubt audibly, which is how the Spirit speaks – Acts 8:29, 10:19, 13:2) that this was where He needed to go. In that sense, the Spirit "led Him." Mark's use of "impelled" simply means that the Spirit made it clear to Jesus: "this is not optional. You must do this." It does not mean, "impressed." What is also interesting to note is that the same word for "led" in Matthew 4:1 is used by Luke (4:5) to describe the devil's leading of Jesus to a high mountain! This only underscores the fact that this word "led" first, has nothing to do with impressions (obviously the devil did not impress upon Jesus to go up to a mountain), and second, is merely stating the fact of the activity, not the process. It is not a unique activity that only the Holy Spirit can do.

To conclude, the Holy Spirit always works in conjunction with His Word (the Bible). He illumines the Bible so that believers can understand it, then He empowers believers to be able to live a righteous life of good works and fruit. The phrase "being led by the Spirit" is just another way of referring to someone who is living a righteous life by the Spirit's power. Nothing in Scripture indicates that the Holy Spirit uses inner impressions or feelings to help believers make decisions or know God's will.

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**Does God Ever Speak or Lead Through Impressions?**

Now we come back to the issue of impressions. Does God ever speak or lead us through impressions? By impressions, we mean an internal thought, urge, sense, or feeling that one should speak or act a certain way. It seems that everything we have
looked at in Scripture seems to answer: no. We have seen that God has only spoken using words and language, and that His words have been preserved for us in Scripture. The Bible never indicates that God used impressions or feelings to either reveal His message to the prophets, nor to record that message in Scripture. While the writing of Scripture was certainly a supernatural activity that we do not fully understand by any means, we do not see impressions or feelings playing a role in it. They seem incompatible with everything else the Bible says about how God speaks and how He works.

We have also seen that the idea of "being led by the Spirit" does not mean "being impressed to do something or to make a certain decision." Nowhere in Scripture do we see the Spirit speaking or leading through impressions. Rather, the Spirit leads believers through God's Word by illuminating the text (so that they can understand it) and then empowering them to obey it and live by it. While this is certainly a deeply spiritual activity that we do not fully understand, God has none-the-less revealed enough of the process so that we can objectively know God's will and obey Him (Eph. 5:17, Col. 1:9-10).

Where do feelings fit in? Some may get the idea that if this is how the Spirit works, that the process is somehow unspiritual or unemotional. But the fact is, the Spirit does use the Word of God to convict us, bring joy, produce peace, etc. The Christian life is deeply emotional. But those feelings are a response to understanding the truth of God's Word, which the Spirit illuminates when we spend time studying and meditating on God's Word. To describe this process as somehow unspiritual only indicates a great misunderstanding of how the Spirit works. The Christian life is spiritual, but it is not mystical.

How Should Christians Respond When They Do Experience an Impression?

Impressions are real. We all experience them at one time or another. We all have feelings, and we all certainly have thoughts that pop into our mind. So how do we as believers respond?

- **UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF IMPRESSIONS** – Impressions are no doubt real, but they are not authoritative or conclusive for deciding what is or is not God's will. It is impossible to know the source of impressions, and there are many possibilities: God, Satan, an angel, a demon, human emotions (such as fear or ecstasy), hormonal imbalance, insomnia, medication, or bad salsa at a local Mexican restaurant. Looking at Scripture, it does not appear that God wants believers to look to impressions for His guidance or direction. So what do we do with impressions when we have them?

- **EVALUATE IMPRESSIONS IN LIGHT OF GOD'S WORD** - 2 Corinthians 10:5 has the answer for dealing with impressions: "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." This means that we take everything we
hear, think, or even are impressed with and we evaluate them in light of God's Word. It may be a sinful thought or impression, it may be a righteous thought or impression. But the point is that we destroy everything that is "against the knowledge of God" and we "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." This means we "put off" all unrighteous thoughts and impressions, and "put on" righteous thoughts. In both cases, we know what is righteous from what is not through the Scriptures.

Because the Spirit works to "renew our mind" with Scripture (Rom. 12:1-2), some thoughts or impressions we may have will be righteous and God-honoring. This is not to say that God is "speaking" or is the source of our impression, rather this indicates that the Spirit has worked to renew our mind through Scripture such that we begin to think Christ-honoring thoughts. While God certainly gets the glory for anything righteous in our life (thoughts, words, or actions), the Bible would not call this God "speaking" or "leading." God only communicates and leads believers today through the Bible. Our job is, by the Spirit's power, to faithfully and diligently study the Bible and follow what it tells us to do.

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1. This little phrase "the word of the LORD came" occurs 102 times in the OT, and always has the word "saying" with it. This again underscores the fact that a prophet knew the exact words of God that He was to proclaim.


3. It might be argued, however, that there is no prohibition given in Scripture against the possibility that God could use impressions or feeling to speak to man. But that is a very weak argument in light of the consistent way in which we do see God speaking, in light of what the Bible does say about the nature of how God speaks (2 Tim. 3:16-17, 2 Peter. 1:21, etc.), and in light of the very nature of words, speech, and language as opposed to the nature of impressions and feelings.

4. In fact, we might even say that we are more blessed than one who heard God speak audibly, because we can go back to the Bible anytime we want a read and re-read what God has said.

5. If I did want to communicate a feeling or impression to someone, it would necessitate me first putting the feeling or impression into words before I could communicate it to another person. There is simply no way I can communicate a feeling or impression otherwise. Feelings and impressions are not ways of communicating.


7. This is reinforced by both Matthew & Luke's usage of the aorist tense, which simply states the fact that the action occurred.

8. The word translated "impelled" means "to cause to go or remove from a position (without force), send out/away, release, bring out "(BDAG).

9. The context makes it clear that the words have the same meaning in both contexts. Jesus was led by both the Spirit and the devil from one geographical location to another, which is what the word means.

10. Someone might argue that just because God hasn't done something, doesn't mean He can't or won't. Some may feel that I am "putting God in a box" and limiting what He can do by saying He doesn't use impressions to guide us. But the fact is that God Himself defines who He is and what He does. The Bible says, "God cannot lie." Is that limiting God by saying that He can't do something? God always acts in accordance with His own character, and in that sense, "He cannot deny Himself." In the same way, I believe the Bible teaches that God (as part of His character) communicates in a certain way: namely, through language. This is consistent with both how we see Him speaking in Scripture and how God Himself describes His communication. It is also consistent with how we communicate as people (we talked about how we can't communicate impressions and feelings directly). At least as far as God has seemed fit to reveal to us, He has chosen to communicate to us through language. If we want to call that limiting God, then we would be wise to say that "God has limited Himself," because He simply has not indicated in any way that He communicates otherwise.
A common misconception about sanctification today is that believers must "let go and let God," meaning they are completely passive and need to just let God do all the work in them. In the context of impressions, people with this view of sanctification often see a false dichotomy between what the Spirit does versus what we do as believers. It is somehow unspiritual (or even sinful) to say that a believer might have a righteous thought or impression that the Spirit did not directly impress, speak, or reveal to him. This leads to the idea that believers must follow only what God speaks or impresses upon them. In contrast, what the Bible reveals is that the Spirit works on the mind and heart of the believer, meaning you cannot separate the renewed mind of a believer with the work of the Spirit upon it. A righteous thought or impression in the mind of a believer comes as a result of the Spirit renewing his mind with Scripture, not directly from the Spirit revealing that thought or impression to him in some mystical way apart from Scripture. Nothing in Scripture indicates that the Spirit works in this latter way.

We might better describe it as God or the Spirit "working" through Scripture in our lives.