

Afterword

I don't doubt that the Holy Spirit guides your decisions from within when you make them with the intention of pleasing God. The error would be to think that He speaks only within, whereas in reality He speaks also through Scripture, the Church, Christian friends, books etc.

Letters of C. S. Lewis (20 June 1952)

Why would a God who wants us to do His will hide it from us? Why do Christians go through such convoluted, painful efforts to know it? His will needn't be hidden or elusive; a mystery, a puzzle, an enigma. The answer we seek already lies in our theology — what we believe.

Our lives and our character ought to be changed by what we believe. And when our lives are changed, we are transformed into His likeness. The concept is very sim-

ple: Don't you think we will be better able to understand His will when we are more like Him?

My career in theological education has been to direct Christians to understand that God calls us, compels us, and provides for us a character-transforming response. Understanding your theology provides clear direction for God's will in your life, with no smoke and mirrors, no guessing or gambling.

But, in sharing with you my thoughts about finding His will for your life, it's important for you to understand something about our theology. Why is it true? Why is it essential? Why should it be my way of life?

As we address these three questions you'll be ready to begin what I pray will be your last quest to understand God's will for your life.

1. Theology is truth.

Sound theology involves propositions about divine matters. If a theological institution is worth its salt it must be committed to truth, which involves in part linking words to realities. Theology sets forth the content of divine realities in propositional form. Truth ultimately pertains to a correlation between behavior and these ultimate realities, but the Bible makes many assertions about God, His intervention in our world, human behavior, and the human situation before a holy God. Moses referred to the correspondence between reality and words as "law." The New

Testament writers referred to them as “doctrine.” Today, we generally call it “theology.”

Ever since the Enlightenment, the Western world has held a faith in the power of the human mind and of the scientific method to know “truth.” It has sought to understand and control nature and has believed, almost without question, that anything that could not be understood by unaided human reason and validated by science was not to be taken seriously. We can know absolutely, however, only if we know comprehensively. To make an absolute judgment, according to Cornelius Van Til, humanity must usurp God’s throne:

If one does not make human knowledge wholly dependent upon the original self-knowledge and consequent revelation of God to man, then man will have to seek knowledge within himself as the final reference point. Then he will have to seek an exhaustive understanding of reality. He will have to hold that if he cannot attain to such an exhaustive understanding of reality, he has no true knowledge of anything at all. Either man must then know everything or he knows nothing. This is the dilemma that confronts every form of non-Christian thinking.¹

1. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), p. 17.

A play does not make sense if you view only the first act. It is not until the final act, when the last words are spoken and the curtain drops, that the play takes on its full meaning. Humans are confined to the tensions of the middle acts; without revelation, they are not privy to their resolution in the final act. This partiality condemns itself. It makes all the difference in the world whether good or evil will finally triumph or go on indefinitely in an unresolved stalemate. Without revelation, humanity cannot answer the fundamental questions of its existence.

The human mind, employing the scientific method, can certainly determine the “truthfulness” of statements pertaining to empirical data, whether or not they cohere with the physical world. That method can answer questions of proximate origins (“How did X arise out of Y?”), but it cannot answer the question of ultimate origins (“How did the law governing X arising out of Y originate?”). Theology deals with what we call “First Cause,” the beginning of all things. Science deals with second causality, and is restricted to finite factors. Scientific methods got man to the moon by overcoming its ignorance of physical laws, but once a man stood on the moon, the mystery of humanity’s existence on earth became even more profound. Science answers questions with as much mathematical precision as possible; questions about the “when” and “how” of this finite world. But science cannot overcome mystery. It cannot decide ultimate meaning and without that light establish a credible ethic. As Albert Einstein once put it, “The function of

setting up goals and passing statements of value transcends the domain of science.”

Since unaided human reason and the scientific method cannot validate ultimate truth, many modern scholars deny its existence. The presupposition of the Enlightenment leads to agnosticism. It leaves humanity only with valuations, what certain people at certain times have thought to be good, but without values — that which is eternally good. According to this point of view we can be certain only that the meanings and values embraced by one generation will be discarded by the next.

Yet this presupposition confronts the human spirit with a contradiction: we yearn for absolute certainty, meaning, and values. We desire truth. All human beings want to see things holistically and within that frame of reference to commit themselves to something enduring. “He has also set eternity in the hearts of men” says the Teacher in Ecclesiastes 3:11, “yet they cannot fathom what God has done from the beginning to end.” The fact is that the Holy Spirit offers conviction that the Bible is truth.

By showing the inadequacy of unaided human reason I have sought to establish negatively and indirectly the necessity of divine revelation, a proposition that means God is there and that He has spoken. It is well known that the Bible claims to be the Word of God, but what is not as well known is that the truthfulness of the Bible depends on the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and not on human reason. My conviction that the Bible can be trusted as God’s Word does not come from human reason, but from the

Holy Spirit. If Scripture's claim to truth must be validated by finite, fallible human reason, then even if it is inspired revelation of truth, humanity cannot know it and must continue to despair of attaining the meaning and value they seek. The Holy Spirit revealed the truth, to the extent God was pleased to make it known, inspired its expression in Scripture, and bears witness to its truthfulness. Throughout history the church has heard the voice of God in Scripture (see John 10:3-6; 2 Corinthians 3:14-18; and 1 Thessalonians 2:13). The "Scots Confession" articulately expressed that truth in 1560 with the words,

Our faith and its assurance do not proceed from flesh and blood, that is to say, from natural powers within us, but are the inspiration of the Holy Ghost: whom we confess to be God, equal with the Father and with His Son, who sanctifies us, and brings us into all truth by His own working, without whom we should remain forever enemies to God and ignorant of His Son, Christ Jesus. For by nature we are so deaf, blind, and perverse, that neither can we feel when we are pricked, see the light when it shines, nor assent to the will of God when it is revealed, unless the Spirit of the Lord Jesus quicken that which is dead, remove the darkness from our minds, and bow our stubborn hearts to the obedience of His blessed will.²

2. "The Scots Confession," Presbyterian Church U.S.A., *The Book*

Calvin in his justly famous *Institutes* wrote:

The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of Himself in His Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.³

Christian knowledge and understanding are grounded in God's revelation in the Bible through the Holy Spirit, who revealed the truth and illuminates its meaning. Humans cannot manipulate this process. We join with Paul in praying, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe" (Ephesians 1:17-19). Theology is truth, and passing on that truth to the next generation is part of

of *Confessions* (New York and Atlanta: Office of the General Assembly, 1983), vol. 3, p. 12.

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.7.4.

the mission of the church. To achieve this mission it is dependent on the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the church has reflected on this revelation for two millennia and given it expression in creeds and writings. If we are to know God and His will, it will be in the context of the Father sharing His truth with us.

2. Theology is an essential part of spiritual formation.

In theological circles people speak of “exegesis” — constructing some accredited method to get out of the written text what the original author intended. If we accept the concept that the Holy Spirit plays a determinative role in revealing truth, then we must also concede that the Holy Spirit must be an essential part of our lives if we are to correctly read and interpret Scripture.

Unfortunately, many Christians seem to divorce theology from spirituality. I have seen seminary faculties divided over this issue, with those teaching spirituality courses fearing that those who teach exegesis will subvert the students’ faith, and those teaching exegesis suspicious of their counterparts for not relying enough on the originally intended meaning of the Bible.

Historically, orthodox theologians confess that the Holy Spirit must illumine the Bible’s meaning. “No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God,” says Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:11. The apostle argues that only as

we are in step with the Spirit can we know the things of God. “For if God does not open and explain Holy Writ,” Martin Luther commented, “no one can understand it.” Similarly, John Calvin in the *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* wrote:

Our mind is too weak to comprehend the spiritual wisdom of God which is revealed to us by faith, and our hearts are too prone either to defiance or to a perverse confidence in ourselves or creaturely things. But the Holy Spirit enlightens us to make us capable of understanding what would otherwise be incomprehensible to us, and fortifies us in certitude, sealing and imprinting the promises of salvation on our hearts.⁴

In our modern day, the Chicago Statement of Faith continues the tradition: “The Holy Spirit, Scripture’s divine author, both authenticates it to us by His inward witness and opens our minds to understand its meaning.”⁵ Yet I find that most modern Bible scholars subscribe to the idea intellectually while ignoring it in practice. Almost any textbook on hermeneutics or Bible interpretation written by an evangelical during the past twenty years emphasizes finding the meaning of the original language in its histori-

4. John Calvin, *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, vol. 1, p. 7.

5. Short statement number 3, from J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken* (Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), p. 143.

cal context while neglecting to mention the role of the Holy Spirit and His impact on the life of the interpreter. My own teaching has been flawed by the same imbalance. A student once asked me about the relationship of the Spirit's illumination and the grammatical-historical method of interpreting Scripture, and I was so dull I had to admit I had not even thought of the question!

The Reformers carefully balanced being a language and historical student with being a spiritual man or woman. Yet modern theologians, perhaps due to the influence of the Enlightenment, diminish the role of the Holy Spirit in understanding Scripture. J. A. Ernesti, one of the clearest and most influential theologians of the last century, felt that a Christian can understand God's Word without resorting to prayer. According to him, "Pious simplicity of mind is useless in the investigation of Scriptural truth." That sort of attitude denies the proper role of the Spirit in the life of the believer. I have heard excellent exegesis at the annual Society of Biblical Literature seminars, but I've never heard a prayer offered at that learned society.

There is a profound difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge. Intellectually comprehending the truth of Scripture is just not the same as appropriating its truths. Moreover, it cannot be understood appropriately without a spiritual commitment. Bible study requires a personal relationship with the Divine Author if it is to be fully understood. Second Timothy 3:16 suggests that Scripture involves three objects at the

same time: God, the inspired author, and the text. Note that only the last of these is impersonal. One may distance oneself from an impersonal text, but to fully know a person requires passion; one must commit oneself to another.

Our theology, therefore, needs to lead us into an encounter with God. Through the inspired author's text God aimed to disclose Himself. The text was never intended as an end in itself, which is why Solomon boldly combined his teaching with knowing God: "My son, if you accept my words . . . then you will find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:1-5). The words "knowledge of God" is the Hebrew word for "theology," the study of divine things. It transcends intellectual understanding, and refers to the involvement of the total personality with God. As John Frame puts it:

Listening to Scripture is not merely a transaction between ourselves and a book, even a very extraordinary book; rather, in Scripture we meet God Himself. For Protestants (at least those outside charismatic circles), no experience offers a more profound closeness with God.⁶

Theology, what we know about God, changes our lives. We approach God's Word spiritually and personally.

6. John Frame, *Spiritual Formation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 221.

Then too, to understand the human, inspired author, a reader must come to meet him with empathy. Without empathy we cannot understand the author. An unsympathetic reader distorts an author's meaning.

In a question period that followed a lecture on Genesis 3 by my Harvard professor, who taught me much about the biblical text, a student pushed him to identify the "seed of the serpent," the "seed of the woman" and the nature of their antipathy. To my astonishment my respected professor interpreted the text with such crass literalness that, according to him, the passage presented in mythical form the eternal antipathy between snakes and mankind, nothing more. I wondered how such an interpretation was possible. Obviously the fast-talking serpent is extraordinary — it talked, was diabolical, and knew of heavenly matters. My professor missed the text's meaning, I suggest, because he lacked spiritual empathy with its author.

Paul, writing in Romans 1, reminds us that due to our innate depravity, we fail to grasp God, we suppress the truth, and we justify our unethical conduct. Satan deceives us with half-truths. Sin has destroyed our ability to do what is right. Thus, apart from God's regeneration and the work of the Holy Spirit, we cannot hear the text clearly or allow it to shape our lives.

The very nature of God demands that the theology student have proper spiritual qualifications. God has sovereignly revealed Himself in Scripture. We cannot make Him talk through the scientific method. As David Steinmetz says:

Scripture is not in our power. It is not at the disposal of our intellect and is not obligated to render up its secrets to those who have theological training merely because they are learned. Scripture imposes its own meaning; it binds the soul to God through faith. Because the initiative in the interpretation of Scripture remains in the hands of God, we must humble ourselves in His presence and pray that He will give understanding and wisdom to us as we meditate on the sacred text. While we may take courage from the thought that God gives understanding of Scripture to the humble, we should also heed the warning that the truth of God can never coexist with human pride. Humility is the hermeneutical precondition for authentic exegesis.⁷

When Jesus walked among the people, most thought He was a great prophet. Yet when Peter confessed Him to be the Son of the living God, Christ said, "This was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). Peter understood the truth of Jesus, the "theology" of Christ, because he was in relationship with God, and God revealed it to him.

7. David Steinmetz, "Luther as an Interpreter of the Psalms," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 70 (1971): 28.

3. Theology is a way of life.

If truth is a correspondence between expression and reality, then our behavior, our lifestyle, needs to correspond to our words. As the military puts it, “Don’t just talk the talk; walk the walk.” To be sure we need sound propositions of truth, but these ultimately serve to assure sound behavior. God tells us about Himself so that we can live in His truth. Knowing God, which we inadequately refer to as “theology,” designates more than the involvement of a personality in the presence of the Lord. God is known through doing His will. One author put it: “the knowledge of God is defined throughout as obedience to His will.”⁸

The Bible consistently demands action, not words. God was pleased to validate His own character in the acid test of history. He was not content with merely propositional truths about Himself. That’s why Jesus draws His famous Sermon on the Mount to its conclusion with these sobering words: “Therefore every one who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matthew 7:24). Jesus commends the preaching of the teachers of the law, but condemns them for failing to practice what they preached. He went on to say that on the day of judgment, we will be judged by our works, not our words.

8. Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 51.

The quintessential expression of biblical ethics is to “do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). Christianity thinks of itself as a *faith*, but Scripture suggests that God’s people will follow not just a faith but a *way*, a life path. The word “faith” refers to the believer’s faithfulness to the Lord, not merely to the belief system. The book of Proverbs uses that metaphor of “the Way” seventy times, and the Lord Jesus referred to Himself as “the way, the truth, and the life.” The “way” denotes a traversable road, leading to a destination. It also suggests the course of life for Christians.

If we are committed to the “way” of Jesus Christ, a way that compels the transformation of lives and cultures into a conformity with the ultimate realities of God, our theology (what we believe about God) will shape our lives (how we live for God). As we are led by the Spirit into a fuller understanding of Him, we experience what Scripture calls “the will of God.”