SOME THINGS JUST AREN'T CLEAR

Posted on August 15, 2016 by Eddie

There are a number of conclusions that you can draw from these incidents; but the idea that the Holy Spirit always guides in a clear and unambiguous fashion is not one of them!
Category: Christian Life

I'm always really confused by people who never have any problems with God's guidance; those who know exactly what it is that God wants them to do at every point in their lives. They seem to have a hotline to God and to have a 'todo list' handed down from them from on high which sets out both the minutiae of what they should do each day and the bigger picture of where their lives should go, whereas my experience is exactly the opposite. I used to think that I'd get this guidance thing worked out, but after forty years as a Christian, I still find it difficult.

However, I'm in good company; there are times when the Apostle Paul really struggled, too!

In Acts 16, Paul and his companions made their plans, but found themselves constantly overruled by the Holy Spirit, until finally they got some clear direction.

> *Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had prevented them from preaching the word in the province of Asia at that time. Â Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed north for the province of Bithynia,Â but again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there. Â So instead, they went on through Mysia to the seaport of Troas.*
>
> *That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, â€œCome over to Macedonia and help us!â€ So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.*

It took them a while, but eventually they got a clear picture from the Spirit about what they were supposed to do. However, we'd be mistaken if we thought that the Spirit always gave clear directions.

Letâ€™s pick the story up with Paulâ€™s farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20

> *â€˜And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. Â However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given meÂ â€“ the task of testifying to the good news of Godâ€™s grace.*

The Spirit seems to be saying two things to Paul

- Firstly, he was compelling Paul to go to Jerusalem. That is straightforward enough â€“ weâ€™ve seen that Paul was guided in similar ways a number of times.
- Secondly, the Spirit was warning him that he was heading into prison and hardship.

Now this is straightforward enough; the Spirit is giving clear directions - even if they do imply that Paul is going to spend a significant time in a Roman jail.

But it gets more complicatedâ€¦

Paul and his companions said goodbye to the Ephesians and sailed on towards Jerusalem. Acts 21

> *After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.*

Get that â€˜through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go to Jerusalemâ€™. We just read that the Spirit was compelling Paul to go to Jerusalem and now the disciples in Tyre are urging him not to go there â€“ and they are doing it through the Spirit!

What are we to make of this?

The first thing to say is that we can dismiss the idea that the disciples from Tyre were false prophets or had got things wrong. Luke says nothing that would give us a reason to think that. He reports the incident simply and directly â€“ no messing around. So, what do we do?

I think that there are two things that we can take from this passage:

- Guidance can sometimes be more complicated than we think it is. We often talk about Godâ€™s will as if there were only one possible option â€“ if you want to follow God, there is only one path for your life. What sort of boring God operates like that? Sometimes God puts options out in front of us and asks us to choose. He has all sorts of good things for us and he can work with any of them â€“ he is far more interested in the faith we show as we make choices than is in seeing us rolling forward on some sort of spiritual railway line with no option to change.
- Secondly, I believe that God was giving Paul the option of a way out. â€œIâ€™m sending you to Jerusalem and itâ€™s going to be pretty horrible, so if youâ€™d like to go somewhere else, nowâ€™s the time to say so.â€ But Paul just kept on going.

There are a number of conclusions that you can draw from these incidents; but the idea that the Holy Spirit always guides in a clear and unambiguous fashion is not one of them!