

Q&A: How do you distinguish between your feelings and what God is saying?

Anonymous asks (in response to a teaching time from one of our recent livestreams):

How would you distinguish between the words in your head and what God is saying?

I'm sure the Bible says not to act in feelings but if it's a feeling God is giving you how can you know it's from him?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

I really appreciate this question. It's an honest question. I think many of us ask (and answer it) without noticing, particularly when we are uncomfortable. It's when we find ourselves *confronted* by or *disagreeing* with something we read in the Bible, for instance, that these questions arise: What is wrong here? What doesn't sit right with me? Why doesn't it sit right? How do I wrestle with it?



Too often, rather than wrestle with it, we put the niggly thing aside so that we can simply feel comfortable again. It is rarely the best way forward.

So how might we explore your question?

Firstly, let's look at things in general:

Your question is what we call an *epistemological* question. *Epistemology* is how we think about *knowing* stuff, particularly how we know what is right and what is wrong.

It the words in my head say something is true, is that enough or do I need something else? If it *feels* right, does that make it right? That's the sort of thing we're talking about here.

Our answer is affected by historical and cultural differences:

- Some cultures emphasise *tradition* as more important than individual feelings or realisations. If you *feel* something is wrong, but the cultural tradition says it's right, then the individual gives way to the collective wisdom. The internal process is like this: "I recognise that my experience is limited. Our tradition reflects the shared experience of generations of people, and is therefore less limited. Besides, I want to continue to fit in, so it is therefore more likely that I am wrong and the tradition is right."
- Some times in history have emphasised *reason* as more important than feelings or individual intuitions. The so-called "Age of Enlightenment" from the 1600's through to the 20th Century picked up on this. "Truth" is determined by logic, and science, and cold hard calculations. This is an aspect of what we call *modernism*.
- In the "post-modern" era (20th Century into the present day) we have elevated the value of individual feelings and thoughts. "Truth is experience" is our catch-cry; if we can't feel it, it is not true. There's value in this. Cold, hard, abstract theory, is not enough to guide and shape our lives. Our lives are also full of creativity, mystery, and the delights of the senses. We are also

aware that beneath traditions and logical frameworks there are often hidden emotions and prejudices and unspoken power dynamics; we *deconstruct* these so-called truths as the self-serving assertions they actually are. “Going with your gut” rather than arguing yourself into subservience is a virtue in this worldview.

What does this tell us? That the “words in your head” and your “feelings” are not without value, but neither do they solely determine what is true and what is right. I know from my own experience, that my emotions are often broken. For instance, I have had a break down and depression; during that time my feelings about myself did not match the reality about myself and I had to learn to realise that. There have also been plenty of times when I held a view fervently that I subsequently came to realise was *wrong*. It is impossible to learn or grow without agreeing with the possibility that I’ve got something to learn.

Secondly, how do we approach this from a Christian perspective?

Our faith in God introduces something else into our epistemology. We believe in a God who is not distant and aloof, but is *involved*, not only in the history of the world, but in our lives. We therefore believe in a God who *speaks*, through word and action. What he says is a *revelation*; it reveals truth about who he is, about who we are, and about what this world is like.

So how do we know what that truth is? How do we know what is being revealed? What is God’s revelation to us?

The beauty of it is that God’s revelation is *objective* and *external* to us. God’s truth doesn’t depend on us. This is a good thing! If it did, our sense of truth and of right and wrong would be self-defined. The truth is that God loves the world, and loves *me*, whether or not I feel it or “know” it.

The truth is that there is right and wrong in God's perfect justice, even if my heart has been hardened and my mind has been dulled, and I am either justifying myself or falsely tearing myself down.

This sense of God's revelation is found in two forms:

It is found in what we call "general revelation"; there is truth to be found within creation and from looking at what is in front of us. "The heavens declare the glory of God", the psalmist says. "Since the creation of the world", Paul says, "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." This is how Christian belief embraces and recognises the value of the sciences; it is a study of creation and of humanity that reveals much truth.

It is also found in what we call "special revelation." That is, if God is close, and interacts with his creation, then God reveals himself in *history*. The written accounts of that history will then also reveal him. From looking at that written history we also see how God speaks through *inspiration*. He *speaks* to his people. Sometimes (but not often, it usually freaks people out), this is a direct "voice from heaven" (Exodus 20:18-19, Matthew 17:5). Often it is through the inspiration of a *prophet* who is set apart by God to speak to the people on God's behalf. It is also through the giving of the Law, and in the inspiration of songs and poetry. The Bible is full of these things: history, law, prophetic writings, wisdom and creative writings, the accounts of Jesus' life, and letters from his followers.

When we say "The Bible says" what we mean is that "God has revealed himself, in history, saying." God has even spoken about how he speaks. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is therefore an *authoritative objective revelation* for us.

The beauty of it is also that God's revelation is *subjective* and *personal* to us. God isn't relegated to speak to us in dry and dusty texts with dogmatic formulae; he whispers deeply and personally into the deepest parts of our heart. He calls us by name. He *knows* us. Jesus revealed himself to others in this way. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate and Counsellor. Sometimes the whispers in my head are prompts by the Spirit of Jesus. Sometimes my feelings are the way in which God is waking me up to his truth, a light in the darkness around me.

So how , then, do we know?

We can be certain of something when it all lines up and there is agreement in our epistemology. When our own feelings and logical thoughts agree with the traditions around us... when those things line up with what we read in the Bible and how we feel the Spirit is speaking deeply into our souls... then all is well and good. We have a sense of being *sure*.

When there is disagreement between these epistemological sources, however, we have some wrestling to do.

In particular, when I find myself wrestling with a part of the Bible that doesn't "sit well" with me, I churn it over.

1. **I look to myself.** What I'm trying to do is to work out what is happening within me. I name up the feeling: Am I feeling angry, guilty, annoyed, fired up and frustrated? What's going on in me? Are those feelings associated with experiences in my life that I haven't resolved yet; is there some pain and trauma that is getting poked? **How is this Scripture offending me or moving me?** I don't pass judgement and soothe the feeling, I consider myself and work out what the problem is. I recognise that my heart is often fickle, I don't quickly agree with it, but I acknowledge the reality of my feelings.
2. **I apply some reason and look to logic and tradition.** Am

I reading this part of Scripture correctly? Do I actually understand what is being said? Have I properly got into the world of those who first read it, and understood what they were hearing? Have I shoved my situation into the text and reacted to something that was never intended in the first place? How have other people understood it over the years? How have they applied it? What can I learn from them?

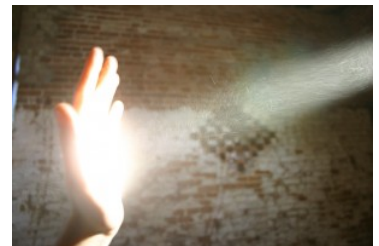
3. **In all this, I pray for the Holy Spirit to help me.** I ask for the Spirit to *illuminate* my wrestle – to give me insight into the Scripture, or an insight into myself. I trust that the Lord has something for me in the revelation of himself. Sometimes I've had a sense of words "jumping out at me" from the page, or stuck in my mind while I dwell on them. Sometimes the Spirit of God works through these things. But! Just because I feel it, doesn't mean that it's the Spirit at work. In particular, the **personal revelation of God to my spirit will never be at odds with his objective truth in Scripture.**
4. **I do it in community.** I share all this wrestling with others, even it's just one person like my wife or a friend. I explain to them what I'm feeling, and how that's colliding with the words in the Bible. We pray together. We reflect on it together. We wrestle together. And sometimes there's a prophetic word within that community that sheds light and makes things clear.
5. **I allow God to be God.** In the end, I entrust myself to God. It's nice to have our feelings resolved, and to be comfortable with the Bible and God's word, but it's not always the way that leads to growth. Sometimes God is drawing us deeper, and we need to give it time. **I can avoid the pain of that growth by setting God's word aside** by either judging it to be wrong, or subjectifying it as irrelevant to me. But, if I want to grow, I need to allow the wrestle to remain. I fall back in confidence on the things that are sure – e.g. God's love

and truth and the beauty of Jesus – and trust God with the rest. Even, and especially, when we cannot see, we acknowledge our blindness, and reach out for God even more.

I hope that answers the question. How we wrestle with our feelings and our own understandings is key to our discipleship and our caring for one another. Thanks for asking. Hope these thoughts help.

Q&A: How do you reconcile the belief that God moves supernaturally as well as naturally?

Anonymous asks: I have been struggling with how to believe and have faith in the God I know who is the God of the every day things and the God who is also supernatural. How do you approach it? Reconciling the belief that God moves supernaturally as well as through the ordinary?



Thank you for a very interesting question. It has given me pause for thought.

My first pause has been to cogitate about the dichotomy in the premise of your question: On the one hand we have “supernatural” acts of God, and on the other hand we have “natural” acts of God. I wonder if it is a false dichotomy?

Scripture affirms, and we can clearly see by rational

observation, that natural processes are at work in this world.

The sun rises and sets, electricity flows predictably, biological occurrences are explainable etc. etc. None of this is surprising.

How, then does God “move” in these “ordinary” things. He certainly does this by creating the ordinariness to begin with. The ordinary creation thus speaks of his design, goodness and purpose. It is not wrong to consider the fruit of the harvest as a providential gift from God – how wonderful that he has so moved in creation as to set up this system of providence! And so we can look at the sunset, or the spider’s web, or the intricacy of a flower, or the magnificence of the rolling spheres, and grow in our awareness of the potentate of time. This I think is what we are talking about, precisely, when we talk about God moving “in” the natural.

And Scripture also affirms “supernatural” moves of God – various miracles involving matters of physical health, the suspension or occurrence of phenomena where they would or wouldn’t otherwise occur, the receipt of information or understanding through some form of direct revelation rather than “natural” observation and conversation. The Scriptural narrative reveals that God does directly intervene in the created order of things.

Clearly these are conceptually distinct, but they are not incompatible, and in fact I don’t think they can be separated.

After all, the “supernatural” acts of God, apart from creation itself, are not *ex nihilo* – they are acts within the created order. Yes, it’s a miracle when God parts the waters of the red sea, but he is not doing something that is conceptually absurd, or impossible to understand: he is moving water out of the way, he is acting *within* the natural, it is understandable. He does the impossible but graspable (the feasible impossible?). When Jesus heals it is not some weird and wacky thing whereby the recipient is enveloped by a

spiritual dimension outside of creation, it is simply that the broken thing is fixed, the disordered thing is reordered and so on.

And similarly, when God speaks “supernaturally” – be it in a dream, a vision, or the various other forms of communication that we see in Scripture – he does so using language (an aspect of creation) and ideas and concepts that are not incompatible with the created order, but are integral to it and connect to it.

So without God moving supernaturally in the first place there would be no natural, and without the natural the supernatural acts would have no context, no mechanism, and no application. They cannot be separated.

So what’s to reconcile?

I think the difficulty comes when we consider our own personal journey through life. That journey is a natural journey – we were born, we grow, we experience the good and bad of every day as the rain falls on the righteous and the evil alike. On that journey we face decisions and predicaments and problems. We search out frameworks and information in order to make those decisions, we look for solutions to the predicaments and problems.

The “natural” aspect of that framework is to engage with those aspects that are universal or common to all (so-called common grace and common sense play their part). And so when someone is sick we make the decision to go to the doctor – that is common sense, and the fact that there is a doctor to go to is a providential common grace. But we might also ask God for the person to be healed “supernaturally” and that may or may not happen. And I’m not even sure if we could tell most of the time. Perhaps if the person is suddenly well without any “natural” intervention we would easily call that a miracle. But what if the person simply recovered quicker-than-most

after treatment, or avoided a worst case scenario, or was discovered to have some more minor problem than the major disease that was feared, or didn't respond to treatment at all but suffered and died... at what point has the miracle stopped and the "natural" taken over? I don't think you can draw that line. But it doesn't stop me exercising common sense, and drawing on the common grace provided through the doctor, as well as praying for a specific extraordinary grace for the moment.

Similarly, if I need to make a decision I might ask God for guidance. That may or may not (usually not!) involve a flash of lightning, a vision, a dream, or even an immediate sense of assurance. It will involve the weighing of things both intellectually and emotionally, a cogitation, an investigation, a playing out of hypotheticals and a weighing of the possible results. Where is the line which on one side I say "God told me" and on the other side I say "I decided"? I don't think it can be drawn. "It seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit" is a perceptive remark methinks.

So what's to reconcile? The natural and the supernatural work together. I pray. I decide. I rejoice in God's providential blessings, both the natural and supernatural and the usual conglomeration of the two that makes up our interaction with the divine. My worship may involve being lifted up on angel's wings, but just as readily be a simple "being," thankfully responding to the basking sunlight and the turning of the seasons. All of it is still worship.

Even the act of the cross is a mixture of both "natural" and "supernatural." Jesus dies as any human person who is crucified would die. His resurrection is nothing short of a miracle. But they are not at odds with one another. The resurrection understood is not a rejection of reality it is the beginning of a new creation, a new "natural" – or perhaps the "natural" as it is intended to operate for eternity. Jesus is the firstfruits of this new creation.

Our calling as Christians is not a calling to the “supernatural” as such, but a calling to the new “natural” that is in Jesus. We are to put off the old ways and clothe ourselves with the things that naturally pertain to eternal resurrected life. These are not strange things, they are matters of faith and understanding and virtue that are understandable and graspable. Whether or not that is played out in this life through miraculous interventions or ordinary obedience, I don’t particularly care and I can’t particularly distinguish. All I know that however it looks, those who are living according to their new nature are doing so because the Holy Spirit is at work in them and I trust for the day when that is the most natural thing in the world.

Q&A: What do you think about charismatic visions [like Unity’s Vision]

waffleater asks: what do you think about charsmatic visions like this one <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVyMPqvnw5k> do you believe in these gifts or not

Thanks for the question Waffleater:

I’ll embed the video you link for ease of access:

It’s interesting. I haven’t heard of Unity before. Your question is a general one – what do I think about charismatic visions *like this one* and do I believe in these gifts or not.

Let me answer generally, therefore. I do believe that God gifts his church with visions and revelations at times. Some

examples in Scripture of such “extra-biblical revelation” include Agabus’ foreknowledge of a famine (Acts 11) as well as through a prophetic symbolic act regarding Paul’s likely imprisonment in Jerusalem (Acts 21). Paul himself had dreams that directed his movements (the famous “Man from Macedonia” in Acts 16). None of this is surprising in that the fulfillment of Joel (“Your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams”) is applied to the church in and through the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

I know a number of people who have had similar experiences in their own ministry and mission work. I myself have had times of overwhelming conviction in certain circumstances. Surely this form of revelation/understanding/awareness/knowledge, whatever you would like to call it, can be a genuine and credible part of the Christian walk.

A key characteristic, however, is that revelations of this type are always SERVANTS of God’s clear and authoritative Revelation of himself through the Scriptures and its revelation of Jesus. If you like, the benefit of these forms of (little-r) revelation is that they help apply the (big-R) Revelation to a particular time and place. So the people of God can respond to the famine, Paul can be directed to Macedonia, and so forth.

I am ready to accept the revelations people experience from their walk with God – but they will always be tested by Scripture, and should always be a means of applying or grasping further the authoritative Truth of God.

Having said all that – let me consider Unity’s vision. It is interesting in that it is a broad statement with very little specifics. It draws on biblical imagery from Revelation 13 and Matthew 25. It does very little, however, to help us apply those Scriptures. In many ways my conclusion would be “Why do we need this vision at all? Reading Revelation 13 and Matthew 25 directly would be a lot more powerful.”

But, bring on revival in Australia. I can admire that sentiment.