
Richard Baxter

on present-day revelations of God's will

Nick Needham

When John Hus, the Bohemian reformer of the 15th century, was condemned to death by the Catholic Church in 1415, he said: "You may roast this goose [Hus means 'goose'], but in a hundred years a swan will arise whose singing you will not be able to silence." Almost exactly a hundred years later, in 1517, Martin Luther wrote his 95 theses which sparked off the Protestant Reformation. Did Hus, prompted by the Holy Spirit, utter a predictive prophecy? We might perhaps question the authenticity of the record, and argue that Hus' "prophecy" is a Protestant legend. However, the interesting thing is that Luther himself believed it, and appealed to it in support of his own career. "St John Hus prophesied of me, writing out of prison to Bohemia: 'Now shall they roast a goose' (for Hus means a goose), 'but a hundred years hence they shall hear a swan sing, that they shall be forced to endure.' So must it be, God willing." It seems, then, that one can believe in the possibility of post-apostolic predictive prophecy without being a charismatic, for Luther was certainly not of that ilk. No second-blessing theology of the Spirit in any form found favour with Luther, nor any view of the Spirit's work in believers which involved "ecstasy" (short-circuiting the mind's rationality), nor any belief in glossolalia as a necessary or desirable gift, nor any acceptance of modern-day apostles or even prophets (the distinction between the *office of prophet* and the *possibility of prophecy* we will touch on later).

Or let us consider John Calvin. In his *Life of Calvin*, prefixed to Calvin's *Letters*, Theodore Beza (Calvin's distinguished successor at Geneva) records the following incident:

"One thing must not be omitted, that on the nineteenth of December [1562], Calvin lying in bed sick of the gout, and the north wind having blown two days strongly [*i.e.* in a direction which could not carry sound from Paris to Geneva], he said to many who were present, 'Truly I know not what is the matter, but I thought this night I heard warlike drums beating very loud, and I could not persuade myself but it was so. Let us therefore go to prayers, for surely some great business is in hand.' And this day there was a great battle fought between the Guisians [Catholic followers of the duke of Guise] and the Protestants not far from Paris, news whereof came to Geneva within a few days after."

There is no reason to doubt the historicity of this account. Beza clearly believed it. So it seems possible to accept the possibility of clairvoyance without being a charismatic, as most certainly neither Calvin nor Beza were.¹

I want to suggest in this article that Protestant history offers an interesting "third way" regarding present-day revelations, occupying middle ground between a) the charismatic movement, and b) what (for the sake of argument) I will call an ultra-cessationist position which would condemn Hus, Luther, Calvin and Beza as

charismatics, or at least sadly deluded, for having accepted *any* experiences of predictive prophecy and clairvoyance. The most clear-thinking exponent of this third way was the great 17th century Puritan divine, Richard Baxter (1615-91). Baxter explores the whole subject at some length in his *Christian Directory*. He had encountered the claim to predictive prophecy, clairvoyance, and other forms of “personal” revelation and guidance, in the context of the spiritual upheavals of the English Civil War and Commonwealth period, when mighty preaching, true spirituality, dubious claims and strange sects both abounded and intermingled. Baxter’s treatment of the topic is stimulating, to say the least. Let us follow him through it and allow one of the most luminous theological-pastoral minds in Christian history to clarify our own thinking. The material is found in the *Christian Directory*, question 140, on page 720 of the Soli Deo Gloria reprint.

First Baxter states the question:

May we not look that God should yet give us more revelations of his will, than there are already made in Scripture?

Before answering the question, Baxter pauses to make some vital distinctions:

You must distinguish between (i) new laws or covenants to mankind, and new predictions or informations of a particular person; (ii) between what may possibly be, and what we may expect as certain or probable.

In other words, there are four distinct questions. First, might God ever give new revelations which add to the ethical guidelines or theological beliefs already contained in Scripture? Second, might God ever predict things *about* an individual, or reveal things *to* an individual, which fall outside the categories specified in the first question, for the individual’s personal guidance, by means of some new revelation (however conceived)? Third, what is theoretically *possible* in this second case? And fourth, by contrast with abstract possibility, what do we have Scriptural warrant *positively to expect*, as either a certainty or a probability, regarding this kind of guidance for believers?

Having cleared the decks, Baxter proceeds to reflect on the questions thus enumerated. He begins with the most serious: the possibility of God revealing truths which add to the ethical guidelines or theological beliefs of Scripture:

It is certain that God will make no other covenant, testament, or universal law, for the government of mankind or the church, as a rule of duty and of judgment. Because he hath oft told us that this [new] covenant and law is perfect and shall be in force as our rule till the end of the world.

Baxter cites Galatians 1:7-9, Matthew 20:28 and 2 Thessalonians 1:10-11. Any alleged revelation of a new moral duty, or a new theological doctrine, binding on mankind or the church, would contradict the sufficiency and perfection of the new covenant and its Scriptures, as clearly asserted by themselves. As Jude says, we are to “contend earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Anyone who adds to the substance of the faith violates its finality. There is simply no room for a Joseph Smith and a book of Mormon, or any pretensions to *that* species of

new revelation. Baxter's reasoning would also rule out Montanism from the early church era, with its claims to new and binding ethical revelations about how believers were to live in the light of the supposedly imminent return of Christ (a false prophecy, if ever there was one).

Baxter continues:

It is certain that God will make no new scripture or inspired word as an infallible universal rule for the exposition of the word already written. For (i) this were an addition which he hath disclaimed; (ii) it would imply such an insufficiency in the gospel as to its ends (as not being intelligible) as is contrary to its asserted perfection; (iii) it would be contrary to that established way for the understanding of Scripture which God hath already settled and appointed for us till the end (Eph. 1:18-19).

Baxter will have no dealings with any claim to be able to interpret a passage of Scripture by an appeal to a personal revelation – “God told me that this verse means such-and-such.” This is by no means a straw-man danger; I have encountered it myself among charismatic friends. It makes the meaning of Scripture subordinate to the authority of the alleged private revelation: the equivalent of making a new Scripture, which as Baxter says is inconsistent with the sufficiency of Scripture as a moral and theological guide.

Baxter, then, is abundantly clear on the finality of the New Testament canon. There can be no new ethical or doctrinal revelations (either overt or covert) binding on mankind or the church. The one universal rule is Scripture.

Now we come to the possibility of present-day revelations of God's will which do not violate these criteria. Let us hear Baxter speaking for himself:

It is possible that God may make new revelations to particular persons about their particular duties, events, or matters of fact, in subordination to the Scripture, either by inspiration, vision, apparition, or voice; for he hath not told us that he will never do such a thing. He may tell them what shall befall them or others, or say, ‘Go to such a place,’ or, ‘Dwell in such a place,’ or, ‘Do such a thing,’ which is not contrary to the Scripture, nor equal with it, but only a subordinate determination of some undetermined case, or the circumstantiating of an action.

Baxter suggests that present-day revelation could convey information about three things: a) particular duties, b) events, and c) matters of fact. By a “particular duty” Baxter does not mean some new moral principle such as the Montanists embraced (e.g. to live on dried food). He simply means something like, “Go to such a place” or “Dwell in such a place.” No new moral principle, axiom or law is involved. Scripture is not violated. If God reveals to me that he wants me to visit a certain person, such a revelation does not contradict Scripture or create a new ethical value. Of course, we might argue that this sort of revelation violates the *sufficiency* of Scripture. Baxter's response would be that Scripture is sufficient *for all the purposes for which God intends it*. It is sufficient as a theological guide and a source of moral axioms. God has said in Scripture itself that Scripture is sufficient for these things. But God has nowhere said in Scripture that he will never offer individual guidance *in a way which does not violate Scripture's sufficiency to teach us theology and morality* – “He hath not told us that he

will never do such a thing.” The rhetoric of sufficiency can become a device which binds Scripture in a way in which Scripture does not actually bind itself.²

Baxter also suggests that God may, if he chooses, reveal events or matters of fact. I presume that by “events” Baxter means future events. John Hus’ prophecy comes to mind. As for “matters of fact”, an example might be God’s revealing to a missionary that there is a certain man in a certain village who wants to hear about the true God. The missionary could of course have found that out by human report – in which case no-one would say the report violated the sufficiency of Scripture! Baxter does not think it would violate the sufficiency of Scripture if the report were to come via angelic or divine agency rather than human. Most matters of fact are not revealed in Scripture but learned elsewhere. Scripture was never intended to be our sole guide regarding matters of fact; and many matters of fact, learned from extra-Scriptural sources, have a serious bearing on how we obey God’s will. How would it impair the sufficiency of Scripture if one or more of those vital facts were made known to me by an angel or by the Holy Spirit, rather than by (say) a newspaper, an eyewitness, or personal observation?³

Now we come to the serious caveats which Baxter offers, and which ultimately set him apart from all forms of charismatic piety. First, he makes the point that genuine special guidance is not only not *contrary* to Scripture; it is also not “equal with it”. By this he means that special guidance can only ever be “a subordinate determination of some undetermined case, or the circumstantiating of an action”. For instance, Scripture commands me to work for a living if I am able, but not which particular lawful job to take. God may perhaps give special personal guidance about the latter. This would not be equal to Scripture, because it is merely an individual application of the universally binding moral axiom, whereas Scripture reveals the axiom itself. To expand on Baxter, I would suggest that such personal guidance is also not equal with Scripture in another sense. As soon as I understand any precept of Scripture which binds me, I must obey without further hesitation. But I am still at liberty to hesitate about a clearly understood piece of personal guidance, because I may still be unsure about its source. Is my own imagination deceiving me? Is it Satan disguised as an angel of light? No such questions need be asked of passages of Scripture clearly understood. But I am fully entitled to ask such questions, and indeed I would be sinfully imprudent not to ask them, of purported guidance conveyed through dreams, visions, voices and impressions, no matter how clearly I understand them.

Baxter continues his caveats:

Though such revelation and prophecy be possible, there is no certainty of it in general, nor any probability of it to any one individual person, much less a promise. And therefore to expect it, or pray for it, is but a presumptuous testing of God.

That is, Baxter has been discussing what is *possible* – what God in his sovereignty may perhaps choose to do, consistently with his declared intentions in Scripture. But the possible is not the same as the probable or the certain. There is neither probability, nor certainty, that God will actually do any of these things. Still less is there any promise in Scripture that he will guide in this or that way, if only we fulfil our part. Baxter has no doctrine of a “right to expect” special guidance, as a precondition for an effective walk with God or a flourishing church life. He sees no continuing place for a

permanently functioning office of prophet. But he refuses to rule out the possibility that a sovereign God may, at his own discretion, reveal a particular duty, event, or matter of fact, to one of his servants, at a particular point or points in his or her life, “either by inspiration, vision, apparition, or voice; for he hath not told us that he will never do such a thing.” To give a contemporary illustration, it seems to me that many pastors and preachers do in fact explain their sense of calling to the ministry in language which implies some kind of direct guidance – not, of course, at the expense of wise discernment of their character and gifts by themselves and the church, but alongside this and coordinated with it. Does that make them charismatics? Not necessarily; Richard Baxter stands with them.

However, Baxter sternly forbids both the *expectation* that God will guide in these special ways, and the act of *praying* for such guidance. Spiritual expectancy and/or prayer for God’s action, he says, must be based on a promise, and there is no such promise regarding special guidance. If God does ever choose to guide in these extraordinary ways, then it happens as a purely sovereign act of God. We are neither to expect it nor pray for it; that would be “a presumptuous testing of God”. Baxter adds the following powerful warning, very timely for our own day:

“All sober Christians should be the more cautious of being deceived by their own imaginations, because certain experience telleth us that most of those in our age who have pretended to have prophecy or inspirations or revelations, have been melancholy crack-brained persons near to madness, who have proved to be deluded in the end; and that such persons are still prone to such imaginations. Therefore also, all sober Christians must take heed of rashly believing every prophet or pretended spirit, lest they be led away from the sacred rule [Scripture], and before they are aware, be lost in vain expectations and conceits.”

By neither expecting nor praying for these forms of special guidance, we erect safety barriers against the deceptive wish-fulfilling power of our own and others’ imagination, and against demonic deception. As far as the active piety of the normal Christian life is concerned, we are to pray for wisdom and be guided by wisdom (Romans 12:2, James 1:5); and this means understanding and applying God’s written Word with sanctified Spirit-illuminated minds. As Baxter says, “It is certain that God will give all his servants in their several measures the help and illumination of his Spirit for the understanding and applying of the gospel.” But as we walk in the way of wisdom, which is God’s customary way, Baxter tells us not to rule out the possibility that, from time to time, without infringing Scripture’s sufficiency as a moral and theological guide, God in his sovereign freedom may choose to direct us in a more immediate fashion.⁴

References

- ¹ For further references to such experiences among non-charismatic Protestants, see the examples scattered through the historical anecdotes of that staunch 18th century Calvinist, Augustus Toplady, in his *Collected Works* (p. 495ff in the one volume edition), and also the whole of Thomas Boys’ fascinating *The Suppressed Evidence* (1832).
- ² One often hears sweeping statements about Scripture’s sufficiency. 2 Tim. 3:16-17 is sometimes quoted: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable... that the man of God

may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” Why should we need God to tell us anything more, then, than he has told us in Scripture? However, this interpretation creates an insurmountable problem. Paul wrote this verse at a time when he himself, and other apostles and prophets, were themselves actively engaged in revealing God’s will by inspired word of mouth, as well as by writing! One cannot think that Paul meant to appeal to Scripture in a way that invalidated his inspired oral ministry, especially not when he appeals to both as equally authoritative in 2 Thess.2:15. Not that I am arguing for *present-day* apostles and prophets; I accept neither – they were once-for-all foundational offices (Ephesians 2:20). I am simply arguing that one cannot legitimately use 2 Tim.3:16-17 to rule out the bare *possibility* of God’s revealing his will today in the carefully guarded ways suggested by Baxter. As far as we in the post-apostolic era are concerned, the completed canon of Scripture is indeed able to equip us thoroughly for every good work; but even so, would it contradict God’s sovereignty and grace to help us out with extra promptings, if he so chose? Does he not in his generosity often give us more than we strictly need, in every sphere of our existence? See also the next paragraph in the main text on Scripture’s sufficiency as related to “matters of fact” in the Christian’s life and walk.

- 3 I do not here touch on the question of clairvoyance as a possibly *natural* phenomenon. Like many others, both believers and unbelievers, I have had precognitive dreams, and dreams which have conveyed accurate information about recent events which had not yet come to my attention. Such experiences, while striking, usually have no moral significance, and can be about utterly trivial matters. One is reluctant to invoke either God or Satan as the explanation.
- 4 Baxter’s position, as outlined in this article, was not something he invented. He could have learned it easily enough from the great patristic and medieval theologians. Augustine of Hippo (e.g. in *City Of God* 5:26) and Thomas Aquinas (e.g. in *Summa Theologiae* 2:2, Q.174, article 6) both took the general view of the subject espoused by Baxter. Referring to the post-apostolic era, Aquinas says: “At all times there have not been lacking persons having the inspiration of prophecy, not indeed for the declaration of any new doctrine of the faith, but for the direction of human acts.”

Dr Nick Needham, BD, PhD is assistant pastor of the Central Baptist Church, Walthamstow

But does not the Spirit lead Christians beyond the limits of the specific situations with which Scripture deals? It depends what you mean by that. If you mean, Does he lead us to apply biblical principles to modern circumstances with which, in the nature of the case, Scripture does not deal, the answer is yes. But if you mean, Does he lead us to treat as historically and culturally relative principles that Scripture sets forth as revealed absolutes and so to treat them as not binding us, the answer is no. Those modern movements that appeal to isolated texts or extrapolated biblical principles in a way that the rest of biblical teaching disallows and those that appeal to alleged revelations of future fact or present day duty which are neither clear implications nor clear applications of what is actually said in the text have no right to claim the Spirit’s leading. Nor may any caucus or consensus in the church claim to be Spirit-lead simply because for the moment it commands a majority vote.

JI Packer, *Keep In Step With The Spirit*, p. 240-241
