

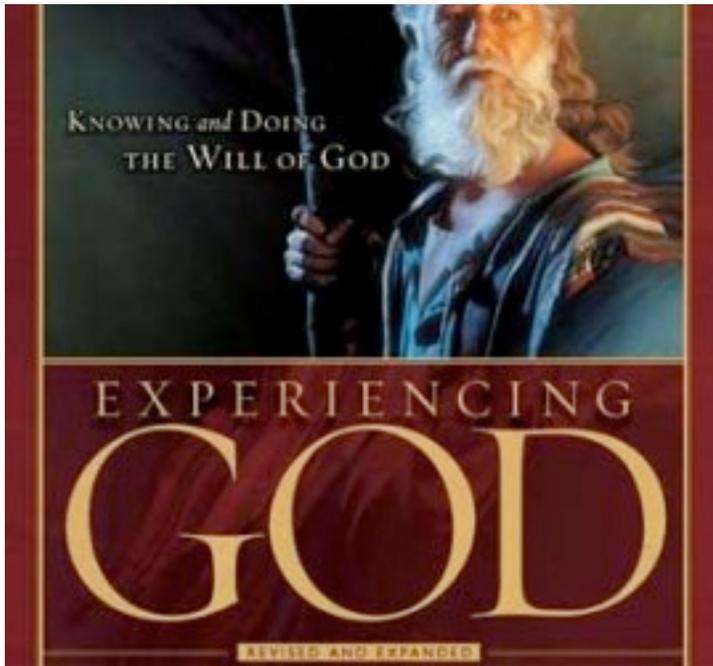
Book Review: Experiencing God, by Henry Blackaby

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Evangelicals have long been interested in knowing how they can discern God's leading in their lives. The question, "What is God's will for me?" is one that finds itself often on the minds of Christians. It is a good question to ask, since we as evangelicals believe that God is eminently active in the world and in the lives of His people. There was a time in history when the truth of a God who is at work in the world was looked on as superstitious nonsense. Many were not ashamed to say that indeed there was a God, but if so, he must be one who simply set the laws of nature in place, wound the world up, and turned it loose to unwind itself without His guidance. I, for one, am glad that we do not serve a God like that! I am glad that when I as a Christian ask the question, "How does God guide me?", the answer is not returned to me, "He doesn't." I am glad that we serve a God who does intimately involve Himself in every area of our lives, and who is constantly guiding and leading us according to His will and providence. So I am glad that Henry Blackaby is able to write such a book as *Experiencing God* and legitimately explore how it is that God reveals His will to us in our everyday lives. The book grew out of a thirteen week study by the same name, which has been around for several years and which I participated in and even led as an undergraduate in college. The book has been expanded from thirteen to nineteen chapters, and is not so much a workbook as is the bible study. The structure of the book is centered on what Blackaby calls the "Seven Realities of Experiencing God." They are:

1. God is always at work around you.
2. God pursues a continuing love relationship with you that is real and personal.
3. God invites you to become involved with Him in His work.
4. God speaks by the Holy Spirit through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways.
5. God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.
6. You must make major adjustments in your life to join God in what He is doing.

7. You come to know God by experience as you obey Him and He accomplishes His work through you. (p.50)



The book opens with four introductory chapters about knowing God’s nature, doing His will, and being a servant. The rest of the chapters in the book expand on these seven “realities.”

There is much in *Experiencing God* to commend it. Blackaby is from a conservative, evangelical tradition and is evidently deeply committed to the authority of the Scriptures. Again and again throughout the book, Blackaby reminds His readers that they are to be captive to the Word of God and that they are to regulate their relationship to God by its teachings. He writes on page 6, “The Scriptures will be your source of authority for faith and practice. You cannot depend on human traditions, your experience, or the experience of others to be accurate authorities on God’s will and ways. Experience and tradition must always be examined against the teaching of Scripture.” That sentiment is solidly affirmed throughout the book. Blackaby is also concerned to make sure that His readers understand that he is not peddling a method or a formula for divining the will of God. “Knowing God’s voice,” he writes, “comes from an intimate love relationship with God.” (p.138) A vital love relationship with God is vital to knowing His will. Blackaby advises, wisely I think, that “doing something for God” is not the Christian’s primary task. God desires to have a relationship with His people. He desires for them to know Him intimately

and to be joyful in knowing that they have been saved and that they are His children. “Sometimes individuals and churches are so busy doing things they think will help God accomplish His purpose that He can’t get their attention long enough to use them as servants to accomplish what He wants. . . A time will come when the doing will be called for, but we cannot skip the relationship. The relationship with God must come first,” (p.30) Blackaby’s book also emphasizes that it is always God who takes the initiative in a person’s life. A human being is incapable of seeking God on his own initiative. If a person seeks God, it is only because God has first acted in that person’s life. “God always takes the initiative,” he writes, “to establish a love relationship with you,” p.89. Therefore, when we see a person being convicted of sin, or showing an interest in the things of God, we can know that God is working in that person’s life. His teaching is not strictly Reformed, but it does tend further in that direction than many other popular evangelical books. “God draws us to Himself. . . . The love that God focuses on your life is an everlasting love. Because of that love, He has drawn you to Himself.” (p.86) Of course that is not an unequivocal statement of God’s sovereignty in salvation, but the possibility is certainly there for it to be read in that way, and at any rate, such teaching would probably be a good shove in the right direction for most evangelical Christians. Much of Blackaby’s book, then, I think could be helpful to growing Christians.

I should raise a few cautionary notes about the book, though, especially regarding its teaching about how Christians are to discern the will of God. Blackaby’s teaching throughout *Experiencing God* is heavily tilted toward discerning some particular “assignment” or “task” from God for a person’s life. His illustrations often begin with words like, “One of our churches believed that God was calling them to . . .” or “Our association was convinced that God wanted us to . . .”(pp. 23, 41) He writes on page 24, “Whenever God gives you a directive, it is always right.” What, though, is the nature of such directives? How does God give them? Blackaby’s conception of these “tasks” or “directives” seems to be a subjective impression on the mind about God’s will for a particular circumstance. God communicates directly to the mind of the Christian and tells him, almost audibly it seems, what should be done. “When God speaks to you in your quiet time, immediately write down what He said,” (p.172). This belief that God gives direct, subjective impressions to His people is certainly not without merit. Perhaps most importantly, it underlines the reality that God is imminently present and involved in the world. He has not left it to run itself,

but is determined to be a part of His people's lives. There are, though, some cautions that should be raised about such a belief. First of all, there is little if any way to confirm whether or not it is really God that is suggesting certain ideas to the mind. Take, for example, Blackaby's illustrations above that his church or association "believed God wanted us" to do this or that. How is one to know whether that is truly God speaking? In the stories Blackaby mentioned, things worked out for the good, but there have been hundreds of times in history when people have claimed the same authority (i.e. that it is a word from God) to do ridiculous or horrible things. In the Great Awakening of 1740-41, John Davenport, for example, claimed that God wanted him to lead the people of his church in a riot in his city and to burn thousands of books in the town square. The result was disastrous. Davenport was discredited, and the Awakening itself was drowned in criticism. I certainly believe that God is able to speak to His people by direct impression; He does so in the Scriptures. But I stand with Jonathan Edwards when he writes, "Many godly persons have undoubtedly in this and other ages, exposed themselves to woeful delusions by an aptness to lay too much weight on impulses and impressions," (in Iain Murray's *Jonathan Edwards*, p.241). His advice? "I would therefore entreat the people of God to be very cautious how they give heed to such things. I have seem 'em fail in very many instances; and know by experience that impressions being made with great power, and upon the minds of true saints, . . . are no sure signs of their being revelations from heaven," (in Edwards's *Distinguishing Marks*, p.282 in the Yale edition).

Another danger in Blackaby's book, I think, is his teaching about looking for a word from the Scriptures about a particular circumstance in one's life. Blackaby tells the story of a young couple who were struggling with a possible call to leave their home and minister in upstate New York. The woman was particularly hesitant to leave her hometown until she awoke one night at 2:30am with an impression that she should read Luke chapter 4. When she did, she ran across the statement that Jesus left his hometown to "preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns." According to Blackaby, "She sensed the Holy Spirit saying that she would have to leave the comforts and security of home to go with her husband" to New York, (p.168-9). Reading the Bible like this, to find a "word" from God directed to a particular personal circumstance, obscures the fact that the Bible has a definite meaning in itself. The meaning of the Bible does not change from person to person and from circumstance to circumstance. Whatever those words meant thousands of years ago when

God first inspired them, they still mean today. And it is dangerous to take a portion of the Scriptures and apply it directly to our lives without any regard for what that passage means in its context. Imagine if a person should run across Acts 9:6, “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do,” and decide that God had given him a word that he should rise and walk to the neighboring town and await further instructions. That would be a completely wrong use of that Scripture, and nothing at all to its real point. Acts 9:6 was spoken to Paul, and we are no more justified in taking that as a particular command to us than we would be with God’s command to Noah to build an ark. Yet it is difficult to see much difference in Blackaby’s example of the woman reading Luke 4. Luke 4 has a definite meaning, and it is unfounded to assume that it is a particular word to this family about moving to New York state. George Whitefield, the great preacher in the Great Awakening and Edwards’s friend, admitted that even he had fallen into this kind of error. Prior to the birth of his only son, Whitefield announced that the boy would be a great preacher and that he would be great in the sight of the Lord. Four months after his birth, though, the child died. Whitefield recognized his mistake and wrote: “I misapplied several texts of Scripture. Upon these grounds, I made no scruple of declaring ‘that I should have a son, and his name was to be John,’” (in Iain Murray’s *Jonathan Edwards*, p.241-2). Whitefield had taken the angel’s declaration to Zechariah as his own, and had thus fallen into error. Let that be a caution to us as Christians to always read the Bible in its context. There is life-changing truth to be gained from understanding the Bible as God meant it to be understood.

What is the alternative, then, to seeking subjective impressions and directives from God? I would recommend a small book by Jim Elliff called *Led by the Spirit*. (Contact them at www.CCWonline.org.) Elliff gives wonderful and sound advice about how Christians should go about discerning the will of God. While impressions like those of which Blackaby speaks are not to be ruled out, he writes, we can’t expect them to be normative in the life of a Christian. In fact, it is interesting to think that perhaps the reason the stories of God’s speaking directly and subjectively to the likes of Moses and Abraham and Paul are written down is precisely because of their unusual nature. God’s normal way of operating in His people’s lives is to shape them by His Word, to transform their minds by His Holy Spirit, and to sanctify their reason so that they can consider and weigh alternatives and make wise decisions. None of this, of course, is to say that

God cannot or will not give direct and subjective impressions to a Christian; it is simply to say that this does not seem to be His normal way of working.