

Impediments

Introduction

It is part of the normal Christian life for there to be obstructions in our way. God uses these in various ways for our spiritual training; indeed they often help us to become more faithful. It is rare for matters to go along smoothly for long periods of time for believers seeking to do God's will.

In the same way that sufferings are vital for our development in holiness, so also impediments are necessary for growth.

But how do we assess these impediments?

It is clear that highly developed spiritual believers, like the apostle Paul, could see through the obstruction and determine its origin. This determines how you react to the problem. If the source of the problem is Satanic, then it must be resisted and the believer should persevere. If the source is the Holy Spirit, then the believer must submit and be patient. However, this level of discernment today is almost invisible.

Therefore we wanted to come to you -- even I, Paul, time and again -- but Satan hindered us. 1 Thess 2:18

Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. Acts 16:6-7

This level of revelation was common in apostolic times.

- Peter was told by the Spirit that messengers were seeking him (Acts 10:19).
- Peter was told by the Spirit to go with the messengers (Acts 11:12).
- Prophets and teachers at Antioch were told by the Spirit to separate Paul and Barnabas to the ministry (Acts 13:1-2).
- Elders were appointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28).

Just as we should study the direction of the Holy Spirit to learn how to be discerning, so also we should study the impediments that obstruct our way and understand their cause.

We are to be led by the Spirit

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. Rm 8:14

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Gal 5:18

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Rm 8:1

That the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Rm 8:4

I say then: Walk in the Spirit. Gal 5:16

If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Gal 5:25

There is no doubt that the normal Christian life includes being led by the Spirit so that we follow him in the path that he chooses for us.

How do we know how to do this?

In the early church there were several ways that this was discerned.

Firstly, there were numerous prophets operating in the churches. We see examples of prophets giving directions to people (e.g. Acts 11:28, 21:10-11). Prophets were necessary in the early church to cover the period before the NT was written and the canon established. The NT now replaces the need for numerous prophets. The prophet brings the word of God to the people. The NT is the full expression of the word of God to his people and this is applied by the indwelling Holy Spirit. The inspired word of God, applied by the Spirit, is superior to the words of many prophets.

Secondly, there were apostolic commands from the 12 that were uniquely gifted by God to give direction to the early church (e.g. Acts 6:1-5). These are no longer with us; only they were witnesses that brought the final words of Jesus to the church (Jn 14:26, 16:14; Acts 1:1-2). Subsequent apostles to the churches are missionaries with no revelatory authority.¹

Thirdly, the direction sometimes came within a vision from the Lord (Acts 9:10-15, 16:9). Again, the NT and the inner witness of the Spirit obviate the general need for visions.

But on many occasions the Spirit directly acted upon the intelligence of the disciple to give direction.

¹ 2 Cor 8:23, 'If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers [*apostolos*] of the churches, the glory of Christ'. Phil 2:25, 'Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier, but your messenger [*apostolos*] and the one who ministered to my need'.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go near and overtake this chariot'. Acts 8:29

Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, 'Ananias'. And he said, 'Here I am, Lord'. So the Lord said to him, 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight'. Then Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name'. But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel'. Acts 9:10-15

While Peter thought about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are seeking you. Arise therefore, go down and go with them, doubting nothing; for I have sent them'. Acts 10:19-20

Then the Spirit told me [Peter] to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. Acts 11:12

Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'. Acts 13:1-2

Whether this was a word from a prophet or a mental impression laid upon the minds of all, we cannot say.

There is no doubt that the Spirit routinely laid an impression upon the mind of a disciple that was interpreted as guidance or a command.

The key here is the walk of the disciple. Only those disciples walking in the Spirit, being filled with the Spirit and abiding in Christ can expect to be so guided. We cannot expect people filled with pride, over-confidence in the self or those following mystical aspirations to receive direction from the Spirit. Sadly, much in the modern church that claims to be the direction of the Spirit is mystical nonsense. This has reared up during many past periods of history; especially in times of false, emotional revivals.

Being led by the Spirit also involves being restricted by the Spirit

Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they

had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. Acts 16:6-7

God does not work according to human or worldly principles. Often a path of opportunity opens up that promises great success but God chooses a different way. The way of the cross is not the way of worldly success but of suffering leading to glory. Why would God train James for three years, fill him with the Spirit but then allow him to be martyred very early in church history (Acts 12:2)? God's way is perfect and it is different to man's way.

This is why the Spirit often has to restrict opportunities that present themselves to disciples. Few have the wisdom to understand the mind of God in every daily choice. The reason why so many churches have gone down false paths is because the loudness of worldly opportunities drowned out sensitivity to the Holy Spirit.

An 'open door' is not a guarantee of God's will; it is just an opportunity. The Devil can open doors too; false opportunities. An 'open door' necessitates prayer and meditation, not immediate action.

The counsel of peers can also be wrong. The brethren pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:12). The prophet Agabus confirmed that it would lead to chains (Acts 21:10-11). But Paul knew that it was God's will for him to go and to suffer (Acts 21:13).

In Acts 16 the restriction is advancing into new regions to preach the Gospel. The chief city in the Roman province of Asia is Ephesus (western Asia Minor), where Paul would later spend three years. So the restriction here is one of timing.²

Regarding Bithynia, Christian congregations were formed here early on (1 Pt 1:1) but Paul was prevented visiting. Peter, however, wrote to them.

The OT has many instances of God's people being restricted from a certain path or action (Gen 2:17, 9:4; Deut 1:37; 2 Sam 5:23, 18:20; 1 Kg 8:19, 12:24; Jer 16:8).

Being led by deception

In the 1970s there was a fashion to say that one was being led to do this or that. The phrase '*the Spirit is leading me*', or '*I am led to ...*', was used to give authority for a false action.

Being led by God is not a mystical or subjective emotional experience. It is divine direction. When being directed by the Spirit one does not normally have to make a public affirmation that one is being led; you just get on with it. The results are the proof of the right course of action. Equally, bad fruit is the result of a false claim to have been led by God. So many 1970s claims to have been led by the Spirit manifested bad fruit.

People that are led by God are those that have become wise to deception; they have discernment through experience to understand temptations to deception.

² At the close of his second missionary journey (about A.D. 51) when Paul was returning from Greece to Syria (Ac 18:18-21) he first visited this city. He remained, however, for only a short time, as he was hastening to keep the feast, probably of Pentecost, at Jerusalem; but he left Aquila and Priscilla behind him to carry on the work of spreading the gospel. During his third missionary journey Paul reached Ephesus from the "upper coasts" (Ac 19:1) i.e., from the inland parts of Asia Minor, and tarried here for about three years; and so successful and abundant were his labours that "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Ac 19:10). [Easton's Bible Dictionary.]

Being led is not an emotional action; it is spiritual intuition. Subjective emotions reside in the soul but intuition is a feature of the human spirit. This is linked to a renewed mind and a transformed life: ‘do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God’, (Rm 12:2).

The renewed mind is sensitive to the Spirit’s operations in the human spirit. The conscience, the higher mind and the intuition are sharp and responsive. So the preparation of a renewed mind is vital in understanding the will of God. This arises through putting on the new man and learning from the word of God. A mind that has been renewed is a mind being transformed; a mind that is learning. New thoughts are developing to control the soul. This is living repentance³ from following Christ.

All false leading comes from the soul that has become flesh from submitting to false ideas, deceit and temptation; or sometimes just from over-enthusiasm (emotionalism). Over enthusiasm leads to mysticism [proto-Charismatic manifestations in history were termed ‘enthusiasm’; Charismatics were ‘enthusiasts’].⁴

We are not led by our soul, by subjective impressions arising from the emotions, intellect or volition. We can see manifestations of this in history. There were occasions of false emotional excitement leading to mysticism where many were led astray (e.g. Cane Ridge revival, the Cevenols, the Jansenists). There were men that dominated others by their strong wills, leading them astray (e.g. Dowie’s Zion City, Joseph Smith, the papacy). There were men of great intellect propounding false doctrines that attracted many that followed intense argumentation or persuasive homilies (e.g. heretical theologians such as Pelagius, Socinius or Arminius). All these claimed to be following the leading of the Spirit but they were deceptions.

We are not to be persuaded by emotionalism, intellectualism or volition but by spiritual intuition.

Impediments and obstructions

Enemy action

Many obstructions in our way result from the actions of the enemy; ‘Satan hindered us’. This is the prime means of hindering.

Is every act of persecution Satanic hindering? In one sense it is; that is, the evil acts of men are inspired by demonic temptation in the soul. This is particularly true of evil acts against the church. Ultimately, it is Satan that opposes us even though the direct physical attack is from men.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. Zech 3:1

Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to

³ *Metanoia*, (a changed mind).

⁴ See R A Knox, *Enthusiasm: a chapter in the history of religion*.

come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. Rm 1:13

For this reason I also have been much hindered from coming to you. Rm 15:22

Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw *some* of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. Rev 2:10

The dragon [Satan] stood before the woman [the OT church] who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. Rev 12:4

Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. Rev 12:13

All spiritual advances will be challenged. The action of the believer facing such challenges is to resist the Devil and persevere (Jm 4:7). This will result in immediate success, delay or suffering and death. The early church martyrs achieved much by the testimony of their faithful suffering; it was not defeat. Delay is not a problem; God is in control of the timing of all events. So there is no need to worry; whatever happens, a good testimony will result from obedience.

However, it is interesting that Paul only once states that Satan hindered him and his colleagues from advancing, and that was the situation in Thessalonica.

In the case of Thessalonica

Therefore we wanted to come to you -- even I, Paul, time and again -- but Satan hindered us. 1 Thess 2:18

Satan first arranged a mob against Paul in Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-9). Then Satan aroused another riot in Berea to disturb the apostle (Acts 17:13). This required Paul to go to Athens for safety (Acts 17:15) instead of returning to Thessalonica, as he intended (Silas and Timothy remained). At Athens, he purposed to return, but he was held up by the opportunity to debate with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. Paul then went to Corinth instead for 18 months (Acts 18:1).

It must be remembered that Satan can do nothing except by divine permission, nor can he hinder the will of God. Yet he can hinder the will of man. He hindered the apostle from doing what he willed and purposed, but he did not hinder the will of God, which was that Paul should be used in other work. This included many conversions in Berea and Athens and profitable church building in Corinth (from whence Paul encouraged the Thessalonians by letters). Paul, however, visited the church there on a subsequent occasion (Acts 20:1-3), encouraging the brethren with many words.

Summary

There are occasions when Satan hinders us, usually through persecution of some sort; but there are other occasions when God stops our efforts to advance. This is usually the result of a test, a discipline for error, or a refinement of direction. Some examples are:

- Test: God tests the faith of the children of Israel who are ready to invade Canaan. They fail this test, fall into fear and are condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years and perish (Num 13:25ff.).
- Test: As the early church advances, God allows Herod Agrippa I to martyr the apostle James despite the increasing need for leadership (Acts 12:2).
- Discipline: The setback of Israel at Ai (see next) was caused by God's discipline against sin in the camp of Joshua (theft and deception). This resulted in the death of 36 soldiers and the defeat of the army against a small Amorite force (Josh 7).
- Discipline: God's anger at the proud sin of David numbering Israel resulted in a plague in which 70,000 perished in three days (2 Sam 24:1).
- Discipline: God prevented Moses from entering the Promised Land because of his disobedience when smiting the rock twice at Meribah near Horeb instead of speaking to it (Num 20:8-12).⁵ [Compare smiting the rock once (Exod 17:6).]
- Refinement of direction: Paul being prevented by the Holy Spirit to preach in Asia and Bithynia and then redirected to Troas and subsequently Macedonia (Acts 16:6-7).
- Refinement of direction: Philip has success preaching the Gospel in Samaria but gets sent into the desert to speak to one man (Acts 8:25ff.).

A person with discernment and wisdom can appreciate one type of hindering from another.

Sin

Sin is a much bigger problem. God's work cannot be conducted by sinners.

I have lost count of church leaders considered great by many, with people who hung on their every word, only to discover later that the great person was indulging in gross sin in this period (sometimes years). This means that during the period of his ministry, the man produced nothing of spiritual value whatsoever. All the lauded greatness of his work was useless because he was engaged in wilful sin during this time (often adultery). Other examples of gross sin in leaders includes: fornication (including using prostitutes), adultery, alcoholism, gambling, sexual abuse of church members, homosexuality and so on. In some cases, the leader indulged in more than one of these.

Such a person can never expect to know the leading of the Spirit.

Ai

The lesson of Ai is significant.

Ai (meaning 'ruins') was one of the royal cities of the Canaanites (Josh 10:1; Gen 12:8, 13:3) but more importantly it was the scene of Joshua's first defeat. Eventually it was the second Canaanite city taken by Israel (Josh 7:1-5, 8:1-29).

The cause of the defeat was the sin of Achan (or Achar, 'one who troubles', 1 Chron 2:7). After the fall of Jericho, he disobeyed God's order and seized gold, silver, and a costly

⁵ The rock typified Jesus who was only smitten once at the cross for the Spirit to be poured out.

Babylonian garment, which he hid in his tent. On finding that Achan was the cause of Israel's defeat, he was stoned to death in the valley of Achor. He and all that belonged to him were then consumed by fire, and a heap of stones was raised over the ashes.

This one man's sin caused the forces of Israel to be defeated by a minor foe; the sinful greed of one man stopped the military advance of a nation.

The church cannot progress where there is gross sin present. Sin is a great impediment to the church.

There has never been a time in church history like today where leaders have been found to commit very many types of gross sin. This is not just Charismatic churches (where there have been many exposés of sin) but even more conservative⁶ churches like: Baptist churches, Brethren churches, Emerging churches, New Calvinist churches, Anglican churches, Methodist churches, Roman churches etc. In addition, large institutional churches have been guilty of corporate sin affecting everyone in them (e.g. Anglican, Lutheran, Roman, and Methodist). Some of the corporate wickedness is criminal (such as Roman paedophilia). This is why so many churches are not following the will of God in any shape or form and why the church testimony is shattered.⁷

Lack of discernment

We have already covered this subject. In order to be able to discern the leading of the Spirit, the disciple must be walking with God, learning from God's word, obeying his conscience, denying himself, and putting on the new man, being renewed in the spirit of his mind.

Experience in walking with God will also contribute to being able to discern issues properly. Every day should be a learning curve in growing in wisdom.

A worldly vision

I have also lost count of the zealous 'men of God' who ended up following a completely worldly vision of the furtherance of the church. Indeed, history is full of such people.

For example, such men seek to gather large numbers of people cramped into a single building in order to demonstrate how great their authority is over people. The bigger the empire, the bigger the greatness of the leader.

After that the leader seeks to recruit numerous churches to come under his supposed authority to form a new denomination. The more churches he supervises, the greater his power.

Where is this modelled in the NT? Lordship over numerous churches in a nation is the role of an archbishop. There is no such Biblical leadership function. Even bishops in the NT do not rule over several churches in a region; the word means overseer (*episkope*) and was the

⁶ Not doctrinally conservative.

⁷ Note that the 1960s promised glory (even prophesied global revival) resulting from the Charismatic Movement has actually resulted in a far worse situation than what it replaced. There has been a multiplication of doctrinal errors, practical aberrations, shallow church members, obvious rampant sin in members and leadership, superficial meetings, predominance of mysticism and occultism, worldliness, lack of sound conversions and a far worse ethical state of society in general.

preferred Greek term for an elder. A Biblical bishop is an elder (*presbuteros*). Note Acts 20:17 where 'elders' is equated with 'overseers' Acts 20:28.

There is no way that a person who has allowed himself to become an authoritarian church leader ruling over many churches can possibly discern the mind of the Spirit. He is already working against the Spirit's direction revealed in Scripture. If you have ignored the direction of the Spirit in the larger context (church building and leadership) how can you discern the leading of the Spirit in smaller details?

There are many other forms of worldliness in churches:

- Using market research to generate strategies.
- Using government tax breaks.
- Advertising.
- Dumbing down meetings to make life easy for sinners to participate.
- Having coffee tables on the sidelines of meetings.
- Adopting traits of the world to make the church attractive: rock music, emotional pleadings, world fashions in leaders, dramas, lighting effects etc.

Focusing on these things will make it impossible for a leader to discern the will of God and be led by the Spirit. His work is determined by the world and not by God. You cannot follow the world and expect to discern the mind of Christ.

Conclusion

The life of Paul shows us that the path of a disciple is not smooth, thus he said, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14:22). There are successes, delays and hindrances. These need not concern us because the will of God is fulfilled in God's way; all is under his sovereign control.

Being restricted by the Spirit simply means bringing a correction to our progress; this is clearly beneficial. Being hindered by the enemy is not to be feared; God will direct us to fruitful grounds elsewhere as Paul was directed to Berea, Athens and Corinth after being pushed out of Thessalonica. The wise believer can discern the difference.

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