



Biblical truth for African questions.

SERMON NOTES

Did God Really Say?

The Third Commandment, Contemporary Prophecy and
the Sufficiency of Scripture

Andrew McIntyre

BIBLICAL TRUTH FOR AFRICAN QUESTIONS



THE QUESTION BENEATH EVERY CLAIM

When someone says ‘God told me,’ whose words are we really hearing?

Andrew McIntyre examines the third commandment, contemporary prophecy and tongues, and the sufficiency of Scripture. These sermon notes call Christians to test every spiritual claim by the Word God has already given.

How to use this booklet

Read it personally, discuss it with a church leadership team, or use each section to open a training conversation about discernment, spiritual authority and confidence in Scripture.

Why “God Told Me” Must Be Tested

“God told me” must surely be one of the most popular and powerful phrases spoken in charismatic Christian conversation.

The man or woman who uses this phrase can immediately claim divine authority in what was previously a fallible conversation. The speaker's opinion becomes a transcendent message. What was previously opinion or suggestion becomes sacred instruction. What one may have been able to question has evolved into something that demands our obedience.

This raises a critical question: What really happens when we place God's name on words which he has not spoken?

The third commandment states, “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” (Ex. 20:7). Our Christian understanding of this command is often reduced to merely avoiding profanity. We are not to use God's name as a swear word. However, is this really all Scripture intends? Could there be a much larger and more instructive understanding of what it means to misuse God's name?

God has revealed many of his attributes throughout Scripture. We see his character, authority, and reputation through his revelation. When we seek to attach his name to something beyond Scripture, we claim it to be received with his full authority.

And this is why the popular claim of “God told me” should never be received lightly.

This calls the Christian to seriously question and test the question of contemporary prophecy and tongues.

God's name is not a rubber stamp of His authority on our words

The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q112-114) offers a comprehensive explanation of the third command. It states that God's name includes more than his titles or attributes. This includes his Word, his ordinances, his work, and "whatsoever else there is whereby he makes Himself known." The Catechism warns that "misinterpreting, misapplying, or any way perverting the word" of God through false doctrine is a violation of the third commandment.

This means that there is more to Exodus 20:7 than merely misusing God's name in our pronouncements thereof.

The third commandment is a call to fidelity in how we represent God.

A preacher violates this commandment when he deliberately twists the Scriptures. Christians violate it when they claim God approves of something which he has clearly condemned in Scripture. We also violate this principle when we use Christianity as a cover for our personal ambitions.

And, from a Reformed cessationist perspective, we hold to this principle when someone claims to have received a new divine revelation from God through prophecy or tongues.

There is a fundamental difference between "I think this is what you should do," wherein we take responsibility for our words, and "God has told me to tell you this." The latter places God's stamp of authority on our words.

These statements are not even remotely equivalent.

The prophets in Scripture never spoke tentatively

Old Testament prophecy understood the seriousness of claiming divine revelation. This is evident by the lack of phrases such as “I have a strong impression,” or “I sense that perhaps God might be saying this through me.”

Their prophecies were always prefaced with “Thus says the Lord.” And this matters critically. Prophecy in Scripture was always seen as divine revelation. A prophet never offered mere spiritual advice. He declared what God told him.

This brings to mind the severity of God’s warning against false prophets. Jeremiah 23:25-32 illustrates God’s condemnation of those who claimed: “I have dreamed, I have dreamed!” These prophets were not sent of God. This was more than an unfortunate prediction. They chose to place God’s name on their words.

This explains the judgment prescribed in Deuteronomy 18 for false prophecy. The prophet who speaks impudently has spoken a word not from God. Neither did he command them, and they are guilty of speaking in God’s name without God’s authority.

The issue is never whether these prophecies come true or not. The deeper issue is that of authority. We are to normalise questioning these self-appointed prophets by asking them who sent them, who actually spoke the words and who the words belong to.

The case of New Testament prophecy

The Charismatic is sure to object and reference 1 Corinthians 14:1: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.” Surely the Apostle Paul is stating that Christians are to desire prophecy? Paul’s words are true. The New Testament records prophecies and tongues as genuine spiritual gifts within the apostolic era. Therefore, the deeper question is whether these revelatory gifts still act within the church today, in the same form. Reformed theology, a movement traditionally cessationist, always answers, “no”.

The argument is not that God has stopped speaking through Scripture, nor that the Holy Spirit no longer guides, teaches, comforts, or illuminates the believer. Rather, the argument is that the revelatory gifts of the apostolic, foundational era of the church have fulfilled their purpose.

The church is referred to in Ephesians 2:20 as “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.” How many times is a foundation laid? Surely the answer is, “only once.” We do not continually lay a foundation with each new generation.

The apostles had a unique commissioning wherein they witnessed Christ’s resurrection. This prophetic revelation is associated with the foundational period that belonged to the remarkable establishment by Christ of the New Testament church.

This does not mean that God is silent today. It means that “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he

created the world.” This reference from Hebrews 1:1-2 illustrates God’s climactic revelation in his Son.

This is a call for believers to hear, understand, believe, and obey what God has already given us.

The danger of “God told me”

Modern prophecy becomes spiritually dangerous in the light of Hebrews 1:1-2. We might hear someone say, “I feel like God is leading me towards this decision.” That statement would be entirely appropriate. It notes our human fallibility.

Let us change that to, “God told me and revealed to me that you must do this.” The situation has changed. The latter does more than merely communicate fallible advice. It claims divine authority. As God clearly did not say that, his name has been misused.

The charismatic may respond with the common defence of “But I am only sharing what I felt God was saying.” This does not solve the problem of violating the third commandment. The question remains, “Did God actually say that?” If the answer is no, then God’s name has been misused and attached to human impressions. This is never merely a small theological error.

Tongues present a similar problem

The same principle of prophecy applies to the contemporary claims concerning tongues.

The New Testament clearly teaches that tongues existed during the apostolic church era. We see this at Pentecost, where the disciples spoke in tongues, enabled by the Holy Spirit, wherein people of different nations could hear “the mighty works of God” in

their own languages (Acts 2:6-11). 1 Corinthians 12-14 also offered theological insight into the regulation of the use of tongues in the early church at Corinth.

As the revelatory and miraculous gifts have ceased, the modern church must be particularly careful about reproducing their forms without due diligence given to their biblical foundation. This is critical when tongues are presented as a contemporary means of God revealing himself.

If one is to say that, “The Holy Spirit gave me this message in tongues, and this is what he is saying to our church,” a claim is made of divine authority. And, again, the third commandment is relevant. Are we speaking the very words of God, or are we seeking to place God’s name upon our experiences or desires? The latter reflects subjective experiences that would be equal in authority to Scripture.

A person may say, “Scripture states this, but the Holy Spirit has shown me something different.” This reflects something greater than merely a charismatic practice of confusion. It is now a question of sola Scriptura. God’s Word has been displaced by human ramblings that are portrayed as new words from God.

Scripture is sufficient

We are never less spiritual when we rely fully on Scripture. No cessationist believes that God no longer speaks to his people. Rather, we affirm that God speaks and guides us through the all-sufficient revelation he has already given us.

The Holy Spirit illuminates Scripture. He does not add to it. He helps us understand and apply God’s Word. He never seeks to compete with God’s Word. He applies the promises to our hearts.

He convicts us of sin and directs our desires towards holiness in Christ. He gives us wisdom as we seek to apply biblical principles to the circumstances of life.

We are to seek to pray about our lives, search the Scripture, seek godly wisdom and counsel, and follow the wisest course. This demonstrates a life lived in humility and submission to divine sovereignty. Saying that God has divinely revealed to us what to do through tongues claims authority that belongs to God himself.

Trembling before the third commandment

The greatest lesson we can learn from contemporary tongues and prophecy is that of being extraordinarily cautious about the false invocation of God's name.

The Westminster Larger Catechism speaks of using God's name in a manner that is holy and reverent. Sin in this area is more than blasphemy and false oaths, but the misuse of his name and the perversion of his Word.

This should cause each charismatic to pause before stating, "The Lord told me." We are to pause and repent before saying "God showed me." Spiritual discernment leads to suspicion of every person who repeatedly claims private revelation.

This leads us to thanks for the inerrant and infallible Scriptures God has given us. We no longer have to wonder what God has said. He has spoken fully in his revealed word. He has given us the complete gospel of Jesus Christ. We have the perfect apostolic teaching preserved in Scripture. Article VI of the Thirty-Nine Articles echoes 2 Peter 1:3, noting that God has given us all things

which are necessary for life and godliness through the knowledge of Christ.

We are not left in darkness, searching for the next revelation. The Christian life is one of hearing, trusting, obeying, and delighting in the revelation that God has already given us.

The Bible says

“The Bible says” is wonderful in how it frees us. We do not have to create divine authority. We do not need to attach God’s name to our impressions. We do not need to elevate our experiences to divine revelation. And we certainly do not need to feel obligated to win over others to obey us as we claim that God is speaking through us.

The third commandment is a call to something far better. It calls us to reverence God. To bow in humility and to believe fully in his truthfulness. And, through all of this, we treat God’s name as holy.

This leads us to the most important question: when we encounter someone who claims to speak new revelation from God, “Where has God said that?” If the answer is in Scripture, we should listen and obey. If the answer is apparent personal revelation, a vision, a prophecy, an impression, or a tongue that claims new communication from God, we should be extremely cautious and distance ourselves.

We have already seen that the greatest danger is not if the prophecy comes to pass; the greatest danger is that we place the weight of God’s name upon words which are not his. And that is exactly what the third commandment forbids.

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

God's name is too holy to be associated with our fallible guesses.
His sovereign authority is too precious to be linked to our opinions.
His Word is sufficient and does not require an addition from us.

We are to be humble enough to say not that "God told me," but to simply and confidently place our trust in God's word to say "Thus says the Lord."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Andrew McIntyre is a preacher, musician and theological educator who has served churches and retirement communities across East London. He holds a B.Ed. from Rhodes University and completed his B.Th. and M.Div. through the South African Theological Seminary. His particular interests are pastoral and systematic theology and the faithful exposition of Scripture.

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