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Hearing from God: A Rigorous Discussion

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Editorial

Convictions and Grace

I have strong convictions.

I have convictions about faith and practice.

I have feelings about certain matters that are inconsequential regarding how I feel about you.

I have no opinion on some matters because I choose not to make them an issue in light of the higher call of building the kingdom of God.



Dr. Darryl G.
Klassen

WHAT ARE MY “STRONG” convictions based upon? A certain amount of my own convictions come from experience. I have witnessed and been involved in events that shape my thinking. But the greater part of my stand on theological and practical faith issues rests on my understanding of what the Bible says about those issues. And in that regard we all have an interpretive lens which differs in degree and focus. In other words, we don’t always agree.

A word of caution on strong convictions: I may have studied the Scriptures on a matter and developed a position that I will promote and defend. But as a dearly departed seminary professor once said to us in his class, he may feel strongly about this position today; ask him in five years and his position may have changed.

The Word of God does not change; my interpretation and application of it will change. I want to be open to the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work of revealing truth to me. So what I believe today may be different than what I say I believe on an issue in ten years. We call that “growth.”

On those critical and foundational doctrines of our faith in Jesus Christ, I leave very little “wobble room.” Jesus Christ is the Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary, conceived of the Holy Spirit, lived, disciplined, taught, healed, died on a cross and was raised to life by the power of God. You get the idea. And those who want to know the power of the resurrection on the Last Day will confess their sins, put their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and live a life of discipleship reflecting that faith. No wobble room.

On the matter of prayer, how we pray, and how we hear God, there seems to be some debate. I get that. I have strong convictions about the nature of prayer,

the methodology of prayer, and the purpose of prayer. I disagree with some of the practices associated with prayer because of my interpretive lens of Scripture. And some of you will disagree with me.

But here’s the thing: Can we talk about how we communicate with God without excommunicating each other? I challenge myself on this one. It’s hard. I have read Brad Jersak’s *Can You Hear Me?* and I find that there are exegetical fallacies in his applications. On the other hand, I have read Timothy Keller’s book *Prayer* and found it extremely helpful.

You may find yourself reversing these two reviews and saying the opposite. I’m not budging on this. Can we still love each other as children of God? Can we listen to each other and affirm one another that we are both seeking to know God’s will?

I am reminded of James’ admonition to the Church scattered throughout the world, “Let every person be

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quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19). These are good words for any discussion on the matters of faith and life.

We are a diverse conference of churches with a multitude of perspectives on everything from creation to prayer. Many of us long for a more homogenous theology as a conference, but I don’t know if that’s possible. So then we need to hear each other; resist loading your salvo of rebuttal before the other is done talking; and remember that God loves the other person as much as He loves you so that you don’t let your anger get away from you.

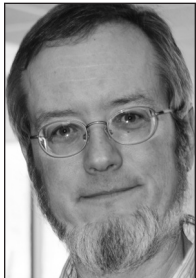
This issue of *Theodidaktos* focuses solely on the matter of prayer. Different voices speak for different perspectives on prayer. Listen to them. Love them if not their words. Respond to them in letters to the editors with grace and thoughtfulness. Let us not bury our perspectives. Let us share them that we all may grow in the grace of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. **Θ**

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Hearing from God



Dr. Phillip Cary

Dr. Phillip Cary is Professor of Philosophy at Eastern University in St. David’s, near Philadelphia, PA. He also works as the Scholar-in-Residence at the Templeton Honors College where he focuses on the history of Christian thought, particularly on Augustine and Luther. This article originally appeared in the January 2018 issue of *The Messenger*.

AMONG EVANGELICAL Christians today, a great many people are anxious about how to hear God speak. Christians of an earlier era would have found this odd.

They assumed that when you wanted to hear God speak, you listened to his Word. You studied Scripture, heard the Gospel preached, and joined in Bible-based worship, singing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” as the apostle says (Col. 3:16).

That is what happens when the word of Christ dwells among us richly, which is the same thing as saying that a congregation is “filled with the Spirit” (compare Eph. 5:18–19). When the biblical word is spoken and sung and taught among us, then we are hearing what God has to say to us.

Different Ideas

And yet many Christians have recently been taught quite different ideas about

hearing God speak—and a quite different practice of the Christian life. It is presented, in fact, as a set of practical ideas we are supposed to apply to our lives. We’re supposed to listen for the voice of God in our hearts, rather than in an external word like the Bible or Christian preaching and teaching.

We’re told that this is how we find God’s will for our life. Again, Christians of an earlier era would have found this very puzzling, back when children

memorized the ten commandments and a great deal of preaching was devoted to the sermon on the Mount, all in order to know what is God's will for how we should live.

Drawbacks

The new way of hearing God's voice and learning God's will has severe drawbacks. Above all, it's new. Christians have only been trying to apply these ideas for a few decades, going back at most to the 19th century, which is not very far back in the Christian tradition as a whole. These are not practices you can find in the Bible, where no prophet is described as listening for God's voice in his heart.

Overlooks the God Who Speaks

And these supposedly "practical" ideas are, frankly, bad for us. First of all, they get us used to thinking of an imaginary God, not the God who speaks to us in Holy Scripture, in the witness of prophets and apostles and Christ himself, all of whom address us in external words.

I can learn the words of Scripture by heart, take them in and make them part of myself, but they originate outside my heart, like the words of every real person who is other than me. To try to hear God's voice as if it came from within me is thus to treat him as if he were not real. Think of the real people you love: if you want to know them, you have to listen to their words, which you don't find by looking inside yourself.

Undermines Moral Responsibility

Secondly, these ideas are bad for us because they undermine moral responsibility. The new way of "finding God's will for your life" assumes that God is supposed to make your decisions for you. It's as if important decisions about career, marriage, and family were not really your responsibility but God's. If this were so, then Jesus would have told a story about servants who wisely buried



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their talents in the ground until they received instructions for each investment decision they had to make. The Bible would have warned us against seeking wisdom and learning good judgment, as if that were a form of disobedience.

The truth is that the decisions really are our own, which is why we are responsible for them, and why learning wisdom and good judgment are important moral responsibilities (see Prov. 4:5–9).

Psychologically Unhealthy

Thirdly, these ideas are bad for us because they are psychologically unhealthy. In order to listen for an imaginary God we have to practice self-deception and get good at it. We are forbidden to recognize our own voices for what they are. Whereas the truth is that the voices in our hearts are our own, and that's okay.

We should get to know our own

voices, not because they are God speaking, but because self-knowledge is an important aim of the moral life and an important component of psychological health. It's okay that the voices in our hearts are merely human; they don't have to be God to be worth listening to.

We experience this every time we pray the Lord's Prayer: it is God's Word we're praying, but with our own voice. This happens also when we learn God's Word by heart and pray it silently. The Word is God's, but the inner voice is our own.

A Young Woman at Risk

Think of what happens when young people, who often don't know themselves very well, try putting these ideas into practice. Imagine a young woman coming back to her dorm room after a long night, saying to herself in a loud, excited voice: "Oh, I *love* my boyfriend so much! He always takes care of me. He never wants to

leave me alone. He never lets me out of his sight. I can't ever get away from him. He's always in control. He controls me so much sometimes I feel like I can never escape."

And then her enthusiastic monologue trails off and a very different voice comes out of her, a quiet little voice that says, "I really don't feel good about this." No doubt that's the voice of wisdom and responsibility, and probably chastity as well. The loud, excited voice was trying to convince her that she's got a great thing going. But the quiet little voice comes from deeper in her heart, where she feels there's something wrong before she knows what it is.

The sad thing is not that she listens to the quiet little voice, but that she can't

admit it's her own. She has to label it God's voice in order to take it seriously. Apparently she's never thought of her own voice as something worth listening to.

Maybe she's used to thinking her own feelings and thoughts don't matter because no one has ever seriously listened to her. At any rate, in order to heed the wisest and most perceptive voice in her own heart, she feels it has to come direct from God. She can't admit it's her own voice because that would make it unimportant. And that's a shame.

Teach Maturity

The new practice of "hearing God" prevents her from developing moral and spiritual maturity, and it puts her in

harm's way. Trying to apply it to her life makes it harder for her to know herself, to recognize the wisdom that has already been given to her. It makes it hard to stand up to manipulative people like her boyfriend, who will no doubt assure her that it was God who wanted them to get together. (There are boys who actually do this at my university.)

Instead of this, the Church should be teaching her moral responsibility and the pursuit of wisdom, which includes self-knowledge. And it should direct her to find the truth of who God really is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not in the thoughts of her own heart. *o*

Two Questions Asked and Answered on the Work of the Spirit Dr. Phillip Cary

1. How do you see 1 Corinthians 12–14 applying today with its listing of spiritual gifts (tongues, interpretation, prophecy, words of knowledge and faith, miracles, healing, discernment) given to individuals for the good of the Body of Christ?

The Spirit blows where it wills, and it keeps blowing until kingdom come. It does blow in different ways at different times and places, but I don't think that means we should embrace some kind of cessationism. I do think it means that the principles in 1 Corinthians 14 for making sure all things are done "decently and in order" (a favourite Anglican phrase!) should continue to be applied. Indeed, my fundamental point is anti-cessationist: nothing essential has changed since the days of the apostles.

The Spirit still gives the same gifts, in different ways to different people at different times, and the same principles apply for using these gifts to the glory of God and the building up of the body of Christ.

and can't be stopped. They should behave like responsible adults, for as Paul says, "Be not children in your thinking. Be babies in evil, but in your thinking be adult" (14:20). So people are required to sit down and be quiet unless they

People are required to sit down and be quiet unless they have something to say that builds up the church, which is why speaking in tongues without an interpreter is forbidden (14:28).

One principle is that "the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (14:32). This means that the ordinary rational responsibility of people exercising charismatic gifts remains in place. They can't claim a special privilege of ecstasy, as if they were out of control

have something to say that builds up the church, which is why speaking in tongues without an interpreter is forbidden (14:28).

The overarching reason for this is that all things should be done for building up the church (14:26), and what builds up

the church is the hearing and speaking of the word of God, which requires speech that others can understand (14:9). So the spirits of the prophets are subject not just to the prophets but to the Word of God that is available to all. This is a point that the Reformers made over and over again, against people who said the Spirit was speaking through them. The church obeys the Word of God, not the demands of self-appointed prophets.

An even more fundamental principle is that the gifts of God are always given to some for the blessing of others. That is why “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (12:7).

None of the gifts of the Spirit is given for your own private benefit; they are always for the service of others. That is to say, they are given so that we may grow in love. That is why 1 Corinthians 13, the famous chapter on love, is stuck right in the middle of this discussion of spiritual gifts.

2. You say that looking within to hear God’s voice is only a recent practice. On what is this based?

You could start by noticing what is not said in 1 Corinthians 12–14. The setting is the gathered congregation, not a private experience, and nowhere in these chapters is anyone described as listening for God’s voice in their own hearts. Indeed, nowhere in the Bible is anyone described as “hearing God” in this way: by turning their attention to some private inner space.

In fact, the notion of a private inner space of the self was invented several centuries after the New Testament was written. I present the evidence for this in my book, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self*. If you look for the language of

the inward turn, the private inner self, and so on, you just won’t find it before the NeoPlatonist tradition, as initiated by the pagan Plotinus and developed by the great Christian thinker Augustine. So you can say that the private inner self is a Christian idea, for it has certainly played a large role in Christian thought since Augustine, but it shouldn’t be surprising that it’s not there in the Bible.

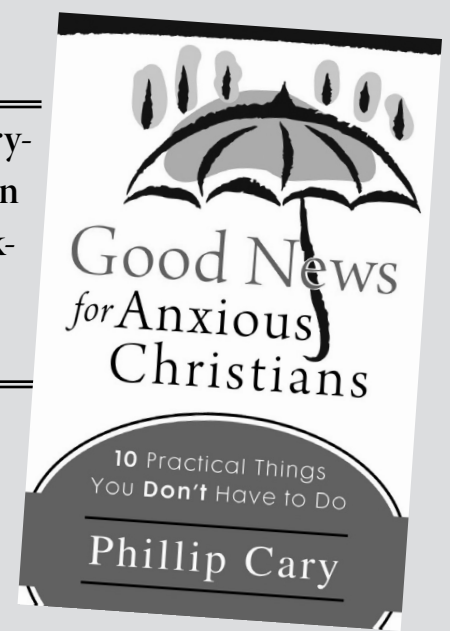
What Augustine did that was most unbiblical was turn inward to find God. He did so by way of a kind of intellectual vision, a desire for the ultimate Truth, which is also found in Plotinus and has its roots in Plato. This is better than the

The practice of “hearing God” ends up trying to sort out which of the experiences in your heart are God speaking, not by seeking the truth but by trying to determine which of them *feels* more like God.

much more recent practice of “hearing God,” because it is intellectual, which is to say, it is a form of the love for truth. Whereas the practice of “hearing God” ends up trying to sort out which of the experiences in your heart are God speaking, not by seeking the truth but by trying to determine which of them *feels* more like God. I think this is a terrible thing to do to your feelings. For whereas the Platonists are right that seeking the truth ultimately means seeking God, our feelings are not the place to look to find him, because our feelings are our own. And psychologically, it’s very important to be willing to admit to yourself that your feelings are your own.

So after writing my book about Augustine on the inner self, I have looked at lots of Christian thinkers who came later. Some of them were self-appointed

prophets saying they spoke by the Spirit, but lots of them used the language of inwardness in a responsible way, to talk about the shaping of the heart’s desire for God as Truth and Beauty that cannot be seen by outward vision. What I didn’t find until the 19th century was the notion that God would speak in your heart and tell you what decisions to make in concrete situations (the practice later described as “guidance”). That notion seems to have arisen among the disciples of Charles Finney, among Methodists in the Holiness movement, and in the Keswick



movement, and from there it came into 20th century evangelicalism (Hudson Taylor was a big advocate of the practice).

But even so, none of these people thought that God’s voice in the heart was independent of Scripture and not subject to it. Nor did they reduce their relationship with God to this intimate inner experience. Hence I think it is telling—and worrying—that a book on Guidance published by Dallas Willard in my youth was re-titled “Hearing God: Having a Conversational Relationship with God” a decade and a half later. (I

give the full bibliographical information in the preface to my book, *Good News for Anxious Christians*). A practice that had focused on decision-making has grown to be the heart of people's sense of their relationship with God, displacing the external word of the Gospel.

The result is a terrible impoverishment, and a great alienation from the way Christians have heard God over the centuries, in the teaching, preaching, singing and praying of the Gospel as an external word. So that's why I call it "new." It's an innovation that distances us from the life-giving Word of God. Indeed, as I found with my students, it tends to look at the Word of God as a dead letter, mere

words on a page, whereas what they hear in their hearts is "personal."

This is perhaps the greatest error of all. How odd that anyone would think that we get to know a person by looking inward at our own hearts! We get to know other persons by listening to words that comes to us from outside, from their mouth to our ears, so that their words can enter through our ears and shape our hearts. That's why my next book centres on what Luther has to say about the external word of the Gospel, and how it gives us Christ. Personal words are *external* words; they are how we listen to and come to know other persons. And that's how God, too, gives himself to be

known as a person. To lose the practice of listening to the external word of the Gospel as a life-giving word that gives us Christ himself, is to fail to receive God as a person and to confuse him with the thoughts and feelings of our own heart.

Okay, I suppose that's more than you asked for. But it will give you a sense of where I'm coming from and why I care so much about this stuff—enough to risk offending people. So I hope you do share this with people who are anxious about this matter, so that it may possibly provide for some people comfort and encouragement rather than offense. *Θ*

Listening for God's Voice is a Life-Changing, Biblical Idea



Dylan Barkman

Dylan Barkman is the pastor at Pansy Chapel, an EMC church in southern Manitoba. He is a tri-vocational minister who farms and also serves as an elected member of council with the RM of Hanover. He and his wife Sheila, with their three children, love being a part of the work that God is doing in a small country church and in their community.

IWOULD LOVE IT IF CARY would come and give a strong and hard message that churches are to be careful not to stray from the Word of God and ought to be daily studying, reading and meditating on Scripture. If he gave warnings about what's going to happen if we leave that path, he would get a hearty "Amen" from me. However he goes far beyond a call to return to scripture and that's why I find his article alarming.

In January 2010, I was convicted of the hardness of my heart towards the Holy Spirit. At that point in my life I had

already been a believer for over 30 years, but had built up such good religious looking walls to protect myself from supernatural workings of the Holy Spirit because I was uninformed, afraid and full of unbelief.

In the past eight years God has grown in me a new love for Him, not just knowing *about* His love for me, but actually *experiencing* and *feeling* His love for me and learning what an actual personal relationship with Him looks like. This goes beyond just an intellectual level of knowledge, but is accompanied

with a desire to submit and surrender to Him, a hunger to hear His voice, and to receive whatever specific gift, direction or correction He has for me. It has been amazing and life changing.

Do We Believe in the Holy Spirit as Described in the New Testament?

I am curious what *we* believe about passages of scripture like 1 Corinthians 12–14. If we take those chapters at any level of face value then what Cary says—"To try to hear God's voice as if it came

from within me is thus to treat him as if he were not real”—makes 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 for instance, impossible to interpret literally or at face value. This is only the beginning of scriptures that cannot be relevant or true today *if* we cannot experience the Holy Spirit as the Bible describes.

Eight years ago I became increasingly interested in the workings of the Holy Spirit. Instead of seeking an author or theologian’s interpretation of scripture, I simply opened my Bible and noted every time in the New Testament that it mentioned the Holy Spirit. I compiled a list because I wanted to know what His role is, who He is, what I can expect Him to do, based on scripture. For instance, all three synoptic gospels and the book

of Acts mention that the Holy Spirit can speak through you and teach you what to say (Mark 13:11, Matthew 10:20, Luke 12:12, Acts 6:10, 11:28, even Isaiah 51:16).

The Holy Spirit reveals things to people, like to Simeon in Luke 2:26–27. He convicts us of sin (John 16:8). He gives instructions and talks to people (Acts 1:2, 8:29, 10:19, 13:2, Hebrews 10:15). He encourages and strengthens people (Acts 9:31). He compels people and also warns people (Acts 20:22–23). Yet Cary says “the truth is that the voices in our hearts are our own, and that’s okay.” What? Actually, “God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it” (Job 33:14).

For instance, how are we supposed to obey the command to “pray in the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:18, Jude 20) except that our mind is connected to Him in some way? Romans 8:6 and 9 even speak exactly of our minds being controlled by the Holy Spirit resulting in life and peace, not “anxiety” as Cary says. (See also Romans 14:17, Ephesians 5:18) The Holy Spirit is described as a leader, and if we are led by Him then we know we are sons of God (Romans 8:14).

What About the Holy Spirit’s Living in Me?

How can words from the Lord “originate outside my heart, like the words of every real person who is other than me” if the Bible says that spiritual discernment and

understanding come from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:6–16) who lives *inside* of me? The Holy Spirit brings freedom and transformation (2 Corinthians 3:17–18). The Spirit is a giver of joy (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

We are instructed to hear with our ears what the Spirit of God says to the churches seven times in Revelations 2–3. This Holy Spirit lives inside us (John 14:17, Romans 8:11; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; 2 Corinthians 1:21–22; 2 Timothy 1:14; 1 John 4:4). It is His role to have fellowship with us (2 Corinthians 13:14, Philippians 2:1) and to teach, remind and guide us (Mark 13:11; John 14:15–17, 26, 15:26, 16:7, 16:12–15; Acts 1:2; 2 Timothy 2:7; 1 John 2:27).

How then can anyone actually say that it is a “new idea” for us to hear Him speak and that “earlier Christians would have found this very puzzling”? This is not a “19th century idea”; it is a biblical idea. Christians who wrote the New Testament surely would not have found it “odd” to think that we might be able to hear the Spirit, or to say that thinking that the Lord could speak to us is “bad for us.”

Can you imagine telling the writers of the scriptures who refer to the supernatural joy, freedom, transformation, life, hope and peace coming from the Holy Spirit that listening for his voice would be “psychologically unhealthy” or “imaginary,” even calling our desire to hear His voice “self-deception”? Or saying that the Church should be teaching “the pursuit of self-knowledge”? What?

Both the Old and New Testaments have many examples of people asking



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Romans 8:6 and 9 even speak exactly of our minds being controlled by the Holy Spirit resulting in life and peace, not “anxiety” as Cary says.

God questions, and God speaking specific time-sensitive answers to them. Examples like Rebekah, Samuel, Saul, David, Ahijah, Elijah, Jehoshaphat, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jesus, Philip, Cornelius, Peter, and Paul all heard God speak either in response to a question like, “Why is this happening to me?” “Should I go?” “Will they pursue me?” “Where is so and so?” or “God told me”? They expected counsel or advice from God, saw visions, and heard warnings from the Lord that pertained to their time-sensitive specific life circumstances. King David even credits the Spirit with having put the blueprints of the temple directly into his mind (1 Chronicles 28:12).

No Prophet Listened?

If after reading all the New Testament scripture references in the previous paragraphs, and after knowing that the Holy Spirit lives inside us, and considering that “men wrote from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21) and that all scripture is “God breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16), how is it possible to make a statement like “... in the Bible ... no prophet is described as listening for God’s voice in his heart”? Isn’t that precisely what the LORD wishes His people would do in Isaiah 29:13, to come near to Him with their hearts, not only their lips?

Do we not assume that when the LORD told Jeremiah to go to the Potter’s house, where He promised to give him a message, that Jeremiah would have had a heart attitude of listening? In Zephaniah 1:6 the LORD rebukes those who do not do two things: they “neither seek the LORD nor inquire of Him.” How can “inquire of the LORD” not intend for us to have a desire to hear Him? It is a mind blowing gift of God to be able to experience times such as Isaiah describes when “The Sovereign LORD ... wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to *listen* like one being taught (Isaiah 50:4, emphasis added). It’s a life changer!

A Scary Thing

When Jesus warned His disciples against the sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:30–32, Mark 3:29, Luke 12:10), I think it includes a warning not only for unbelievers, but also for those who follow Jesus. Suppose we cautiously define the unforgiveable sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit as a sin committed by unbelievers who deliberately reject the ministry of the Holy Spirit calling them to salvation. Could you not picture this as someone putting a finger in each ear while talking loudly in an effort to drown out the voice that they do not wish to hear?

It reminds me of the Old Testament passage where the LORD says, “To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will *listen* to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot *hear*. The word of the LORD is offensive to them; they find no pleasure in it” (Jeremiah 6:10, emphasis added). The problem is that in the book of Jeremiah, God is speaking specifically to His chosen people, not unbelievers.

There is a similar warning in the New Testament that is also very clearly given to Jesus’ followers. For instance, what does it mean to quench, or resist or put out the fire of the Holy Spirit? (See Acts 7:51, 1 Thessalonians 5:19, Ephesians 4:30.) Are we not being warned to *not* hinder the work of the Holy Spirit? The Holy Spirit is sensitive and easily frightened off like a dove, not forcing His way on us. He allows our behaviour and attitude towards Him to determine the amount of His work in our lives. His gentle supernatural work requires an attitude of hunger and desire in order for Him to operate effectively, which lines up with the attitude that Jesus said was required in order “to be filled”, according to Matthew 5:6 and John 7:37–39.

While I do agree with Cary that it

would be horribly misleading for anyone to say that we are supposed to *only* listen to the Spirit and quit reading the Bible, the statements in his article are contrary to what I read in the Bible, and that is a scary thing.

The Holy Spirit is sensitive and easily frightened off like a dove, not forcing His way on us. He allows our behaviour and attitude towards Him to determine the amount of His work in our lives.

Hearing God Draws People to Study His Word

Today I could share story after story about myself, my family, people in our congregation, and of other believers in the community having “heard” the Spirit speak to us with words, thoughts or incredible pictures and visions. In all of these stories never once did *hearing* “undermine moral responsibility.” People who listen and hear still have decisions to make.

The result of those who intentionally listen for God’s voice is not turning into a robot who assumes that “God makes all your decisions for you.” Rather, those who hear His voice fall in love with Jesus, become willing to suffer and die for Him, can actually feel and sense His presence, and hear His voice. This results in a passionate desire to increase our reading and studying of the Bible, the very thing that Cary says those who “hear God” are not doing.

I am so glad that I have come to embrace the voice of the Lord, yet I am still growing. From what I have tasted and seen, not only is the Lord “good,” but hearing Him creates a hunger in me for more. More of Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit!

Consider the numerous scriptures in the Old Testament which urge God’s

followers to listen and inquire of Him. For example, King David often expected “answers from the LORD” in addition to the written law that he had (Psalms 25:14, 28:1–2, 32:8–9, 81:8–16, 91:15, 139:17–18, 143:6–10; Ecclesiastes 5:1; Isa. 30:19–21, 65:12, 66:4; Jeremiah 33:3).

In the New Testament the Holy Spirit did not only speak through “outer words” (as Cary seems to indicate), but with power and conviction, speaking truth and penetrating right into our deceptive hearts (1 Thessalonians 1:5, 1 Corinthians 2:4–5). In fact we can diligently study the scriptures and still be fooled into thinking that the scriptures themselves possess eternal life. The Scriptures are crucial to know and to meditate on day and night, but real life is found in Jesus (John 5:39–40).

Jesus said it was for our good that He was going away (John 16:7) because then He would send the Counselor to live within us. If we have this life

source within us, how can it be wrong to think that we might hear Him if we listen? Wasn't Mary (Luke 10:39) commended for having exactly that attitude? The Holy Spirit is a deposit guaranteeing what is yet to come (2 Corinthians 1:21–22, 2 Corinthians 5:5, 2 Timothy 1:14). His job is to take from what belongs to Jesus and make it known to us (John 16:12–15).

Listening Brings Rest

It's also worth noting that Isaiah (Isaiah 28:12–13) talks about freedom and rest coming from the word of the LORD coupled together with an attitude of listening. He describes a people that are familiar with the word of the LORD, yet when they remove the attitude of listening from their lives, the word of the LORD is reduced to a list of rules which ends up trapping them, rather than giving them rest.

Stories Both Local and Around the World

The article written by Cary goes against many scriptures that clearly indicate “hearing from God” is not a new idea. The very common Acts 16:6–10 is another example. This is not a small issue. As North American believers living in safety and freedom, we forget that most Christians in the world today do not have the luxury of numerous Bibles and study materials at their disposal, yet they come to know the same Jesus that we do. Some come even without ever reading a Bible before they put their faith in Jesus.

in Jesus as a “paragraph just dropped into my head... boom, boom... like I know.” What about Prison Fellowship Ministries, which is considered the world's largest ministry to prisoners? It started when Chuck Colson had a vision from the Lord in April of 1975 of men and women walking around in prison grey and having Bible classes and praying. He himself described it as “either I was going crazy or God was speaking to me.” This list could go on and on, and many of these people have vibrant, fruitful ministries today.

I think we in North America are saturated with pride, unbelief and

I think we in North America are saturated with pride, unbelief and weak faith. In that context, we need to be careful not to oppose those who are perhaps just coming out of their shell and realizing that the Holy Spirit wants to have fellowship with us and to communicate with us. His words are wonderful, line up with scripture every time, and bring life.

Jesus speaks to them through dreams and visions that lead them to Himself. Only later do they find other believers who can explain the gospel further.

Consider the testimony of a man like Brother Yun (“The Heavenly Man”) who came to faith in Jesus along with many others in his community before ever reading a Bible or even meeting a Christian or hearing a preacher. Consider the many stories from authors like Tom Doyle in his books *Standing in the Fire* or *Dreams and Visions* where many believers come to faith in Jesus through a dream or vision and hear specific words spoken to them directly by God.

The testimony of author Eric Metaxas (see the ‘I Am Second’ website for quick reference) is another amazing example. He describes the understanding of the dream that brought him to accepting faith

weak faith. In that context, we need to be careful not to oppose those who are perhaps just coming out of their shell and realizing that the Holy Spirit wants to have fellowship with us and to communicate with us. His words are wonderful, line up with scripture every time (they usually are scripture), and bring life (John 7:38–39). Thank You, Jesus!

While I do understand that there are guardrails that need to be in place in order to prevent people from dismissing the need for Bible study, memorization, accountability from other believers and leadership within the church body and so on, I don't think that those guard rails are served effectively with Cary's article.

The cost is high if we do not inquire of the Lord and expect Him to respond. Jeremiah 10:21 and 13:17 say that the

result of that would be a scattered flock.

God is calling us into a new level of personal and vibrant relationship with Himself, one where we can be like Saul/Paul and use the intellectual Bible knowledge that we have been trained in and continue to train in, and yet not let that knowledge surpass the need for “a demonstration of the Spirit’s power so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:4–5).

A relationship this personal has to include a heart attitude of listening, humility and childlike faith (Matthew 18:3, 19:14). There is nothing that can replace hearing the voice of God. For those who struggle with unbelief, praying Mark 9:24 is a good place to start. \emptyset

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How God Speaks is Not an Either/Or



Doreen Reimer Peters

Doreen Reimer Peters, BEd, MA, has served in education, with TeachBeyond (formerly Janz Team Ministries) in Canada and Germany, and with Steinbach EMC in a variety of capacities. She is now part of Braeside EMC.

MORE THAN FIFTY years ago, via her books, Rosalind Rinker introduced me to conversational prayer. This began a whole new chapter in my life: intimacy with Jesus gave me a new center, a new perspective, and an unfolding experience of God’s unfathomable love for me.

Conversational prayer involves listening to the voice of God, the Holy Spirit, in my heart, listening and praying along with others as they, too, seek God in prayer.

Much more recently I came across *Hearing God, developing a conversational relationship with God* by Dallas Willard (IVP, expanded 2012). Dr. Willard

writes: “God comes to us precisely in and through our thoughts, perceptions and experiences...he can approach our conscious life *only* through them, for they are the substance of our lives.... (Romans 12:2) He will help us learn to distinguish when a thought is ours alone and when it is also his.”

Romans 12:2 says, “Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you” (emphasis mine).

Jesus taught that his followers can distinguish his voice from other voices because they *know* him: the sheep recognize his voice, listen and follow him, and the shepherd *knows* his sheep (John 10:3, 27; emphasis mine). I believe God’s voice to us, his children and friends, often is by means of a deep knowing, a *consciousness* so deep that one *just knows*.


looking back at the way He has directed, I know this is God’s way for me. This is not an “imaginary God” I seek, but the same God who speaks as I read the Bible.

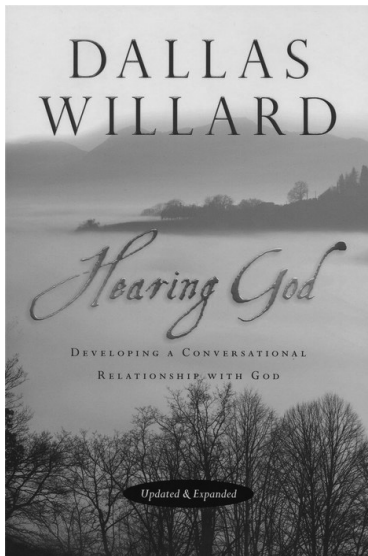
Time and again I experience the real God speaking in me and accomplishing a critical purpose when, after holding a concern involving a specific person in my heart in prayer, that very person is brought into my path just at the right time and place!

I have to notice the work God is doing, and respond, or I will miss it—He “speaks” so softly! I am both excited and

of my husband John when both were teaching at the St. Chrichona seminary near Basel, Switzerland, in the late 1970s. Dr. Bockmuehl was subsequently called to Regent College in Vancouver where, as professor of theology and ethics, he inspired students and faculty alike. While he was nearing his death from cancer in 1989, he wrote, *Listening to the God who Speaks* (Helmets & Howard, 1990), a concise, profound overview of the vision he held of God’s Kingdom.

In the last chapter, “Reflections for a Listening Heart,” Bockmuehl quotes Augustine: “How we are to please not men, but God, I am being told by Him, from Whom all healthy admonitions derive, be they found in Scripture or perceived in the innermost soul.” Bockmuehl continues: “In a strikingly comprehensive formula, these words present us with, first, a straight antithesis of *goals*—to please not people, but God—and, second, a juxtaposition of two legitimate *means* of communication—Scripture and the soul” (147).

For Dr. Bockmuehl this teaching was his “last will and testament,” and he deeply felt the Christian world needed to hear it. 



Dr. Willard writes: “God comes to us precisely in and through our thoughts, perceptions and experiences...he can approach our conscious life *only* through them, for they are the substance of our lives.... (Romans 12:2) He will help us learn to distinguish when a thought is ours alone and when it is also his.”

Not An Either/Or

This is not an either/or matter: reading and hearing the “external word” and listening to “the voice of God in our hearts” are both part of hearing God speak.

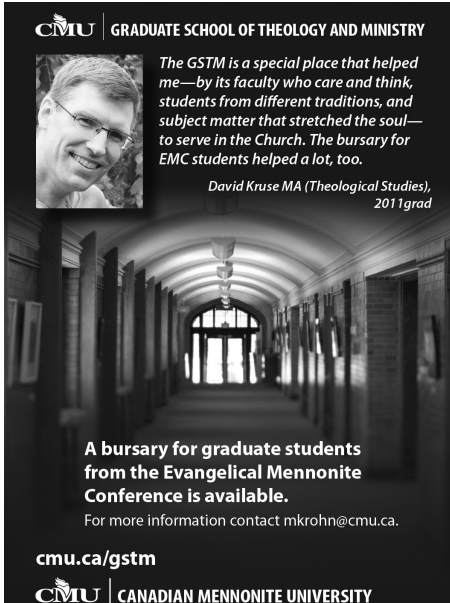
“To try to hear God’s voice as if it came from within me is thus to treat him as if he were not real” (Cary)—to me this statement is totally unreal! How else does God approach us but through “our thoughts, perceptions, and experiences”? “Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take” (Proverbs 3:6). Sometimes gradually, at other times through a sudden knowing, and often

humbled that I am given the grace to cooperate with God. I’m stronger together with Him!

Psalms 139 shows God being totally involved with the minutest details of my life, and I find His presence comforting, enriching, and faithful. The analogy posed in the section “a young woman at risk” is confusing to me. This does not present what I read in the psalm. The psalmist, and poet, imagines, visualizes, and perceives a loving God in His thoughts of me as I live through my day. How wonderful!

Dr. Klaus Bockmuehl

Dr. Klaus Bockmuehl was a colleague



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How Do I Hear From God?

Tim Dyck

Tim Dyck has a Certificate of Biblical Studies from Winkler Bible Institute and a Bachelor of Computer Science (U. of M.) He serves as the executive director of the EMC and is part of Steinbach EFC.

EVERY SO OFTEN AN issue crops up that causes a considerable amount of discussion (often heated!) among our EMC churches. One recent example is the cancellation of the SBC Leadership Conference because of varying opinions regarding the thoughts of the invited speaker, Dr. Phillip Cary.

His article on “Hearing From God” in *The Messenger* evoked quite a strong response from some pastors, leaders, and congregants of EMC churches. Likewise, cancelling the event also evoked a strong response. It seemed as though there were no good options available, only less bad options.

What is the EMC’s Position?

Many people began asking: “What is the position of the EMC about how we hear from God?” The short answer is that EMC does not have a position on that topic. Our recently revised Statement of Faith speaks to the important ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, but this is not an adequate answer to the question since the statement can be understood in various ways.

I believe that within our churches there are a variety of understandings on this topic, and I also believe that we can respect those who think differently than we do on matters such as these. I want to offer a few of my thoughts on the subject, but these are mine alone and do not reflect any position within the EMC.

A Core Value, No Other Way?

One of the core values of EMC congregants throughout the years has

been the centrality of Scripture for our understanding of who God is. We defer to Scripture as the primary way that we learn about God and His purposes, and we place high value on understanding scriptural truth.

Reading, studying, memorizing, preaching, teaching, and understanding Scripture is still the primary and most important way in which we hear from God today. But does this mean that God only speaks through His Word? Is there no other way that God communicates to His children in the Church today?

Even a casual reading of the book of Acts demonstrates that God was actively engaged in communicating to the believers in the Early Church through visions, dreams, circumstances, and the voice of the Holy Spirit. Jesus foretells that God wants to communicate through the Holy Spirit in His prayer in John 16.

Paul expands on the communication role of the Holy Spirit to the believer in passages such as Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 2. So it should not come as a surprise to any Christian when God conveys a message to us through means other than His Word.


There is not one single way that God will communicate to each believer, but I believe that each person will experience God’s voice in a way that is personal and meaningful. For some, His voice speaks through nature and seeing His hand in creation. Others hear God’s voice in music and art, while still others will hear Him primarily through study of Scripture.

I believe that within our churches there are a variety of understandings on this topic, and I also believe that we can respect those who think differently than we do on matters such as these.

My experiences in hearing from God have occurred in a variety of ways, including the most significant—his illumination of Scripture. Sometimes I have prayed for wisdom for a particularly thorny issue, and then soon after received an idea that speaks directly to my situation. At other times, I have received a gentle prompting or impression within my spirit, which requires an action or response on my part.

I have marvelled at the way that God arranges circumstances in response to my prayer for understanding or direction. When I ask Him to reveal the intentions of my heart, He is not shy to show me where I need to repent and change. I believe these, and others, all to be ways in which God’s Spirit communicates with our spirits today (1 Corinthians 2:10–12).

Recent Events

The recent events have demonstrated that this is a topic of wide interest to many people. I pray that we can have this discussion and learn from each other in respectful ways. So I ask, how do you hear from God? 



Cary's Article Was a Breath of Fresh Air

Jeff Thiessen



Jeff and Donna Thiessen serve as deacons in MacGregor EMC where they are active in music and worship planning. Jeff works as a residential designer and farms a bit. He holds a BTh (CMBC) and a BEd (U of M).

I APPRECIATED THE article by Dr. Phillip Cary in *The Messenger* very much. It was a breath of fresh air. I enjoyed reading a concise, focused, specific opinion piece. I enjoyed reading a hard look at the process of discernment in the church and in individual experience.

I appreciated his willingness to recognize the voice of our own experience and a clear differentiation of that voice from what may or may not be the leading of God's Spirit in our lives.

I appreciated his emphasis on discerning the will of God together in worship in the context of preaching, music, and the experiences and opinions of our brothers and sisters in faith. I appreciated his use of Jesus' parable of the talents from Matthew 25 to illustrate that God expects our initiative and ideas in relationship with the Holy Spirit's gifts.

I Respect Other Opinions

However, it became clear to me that not everyone found the article as refreshing as

I did. In fact I spoke to people who found it offensive. I want to respect that opinion. Christian leaders have sometimes used church authority and official discernment processes abusively as a way to maintain power and squelch dissent.

In that context it can feel comforting or freeing to believe that we don't need the Church, Scripture, or our own internal decision-making struggles if Jesus and the Spirit can be expected to speak to us reliably and directly. For those who struggle with a sense of low worth it

may be encouraging to move away from a sense of our own inner voice and instead attribute that voice directly to God without question or examination.

The Importance of Discernment

However, with due respect to those difficult experiences, Scripture speaks clearly about the importance of discernment within the church and the difference between opinion and divine guidance. The idea that extra-biblical or super-biblical revelations can be expected from God's Spirit is incorrect at its core and Cary correctly, if bluntly, nails that point.

Clumsy At Best

While I agreed with his main point I didn't appreciate everything Cary had to say. His concluding example of a young woman struggling to decide what to do about a romantic relationship was clumsy at best. In the era of #metoo it's especially inappropriate for a middle-aged male author to project his experience onto a young female with overtones of sexual tension. The article would have been clearer and easier to understand with a different example.

A Sad Decision

It appears that others in EMC churches objected to Cary's article to the extent that the EMC felt the need to request that SBC withdraw his invitation to speak. That's sad for me in ways that I find hard to get hold of.

It's one thing to object to an opinion, but to withdraw the person offering that opinion from a college level conference of church leaders because it is thought provoking or contentious is problematic. If we can't speak openly with each other about how God guides us, what can we speak about?

The topic joins the list of things that must not be named or spoken of in our church circles lest we disagree. It's especially unfortunate when what Cary

is proposing is an ongoing prayerful, worshipful process of searching for, discerning, and following in the will of God as we understand it.

It's especially unfortunate when what he is urging caution about is a sense that any process in the church can be undermined or overthrown arbitrarily by someone who believes that God told them it must be so. As Cary correctly points out, in certain Christian circles, including perhaps our own, the claim from an individual that "Jesus just really spoke to me about such and such" has come to trump or displace other prayerful, faithful, scriptural methods of discerning the way before us.

Correction Needed

That needs correction, and to shun even a discussion about that correction is not good. We have to be able to talk about how we discern God's leading. If we can't do that, especially in a conference of leaders, there's nothing remaining to say and we have stopped being the Church.

As I talked to others both in our own congregation and conference, as well as in

It appears that others in EMC churches objected to Cary's article to the extent that the EMC felt the need to request that SBC withdraw his invitation to speak. That's sad for me in ways that I find hard to get hold of.

other churches that support SBC, it seems to me that the crux of the disagreement caused by this leadership conference has to do with the question of cessation. The accusation appears to be that those who agree with Cary's critique are also saying that the Spirit of God no longer moves actively in the world.

A Red Herring

In conversation after the article was published, Cary denies this accusation and is clear about his belief that God's Spirit continues to be active. He is not cessationist himself, and the argument that he's making is not a cessationist argument. The topic of cessation is a red herring in this discussion. It's a separate conversation. It's not an unimportant conversation, but it is a different one.

The question at hand really has nothing to do with cessation. The question is not whether the Spirit of God moves in the world but how we discern which of the voices around us and in our own minds are guided by the Spirit and which ones are not, as Kevin Wiebe's recently reprinted article suggests.

The process of discerning the Spirit both in Scripture and in our current time happens through our own ideas in conversation with other points of view. Sometimes those points of view come from people around us or from authors whose works we are reading or from the Bible itself. Through that combination of points of view we decide whether an idea

is Spirit-guided or not.

Sometimes the active decision happens in a group of people or in an organization such as the church, and sometimes it happens individually, but it does not happen in isolation. The early church at Berea was commended for its rigorous examination of ideas in

Acts 17 and the Church is commanded urgently to test and examine the teachers, spirits, and ideas that come up in it (1 John 4, Rom. 12, 1 Thess. 5, and elsewhere).

To reduce the topic initiated by this article to a simple question of whether God's Spirit continues to be active or not is unfair both to the author and to those of us who need to be discussing this topic

but are, instead, off on a theological side-track.

My guess is that relatively few people in evangelical churches, including EMC churches, are supporters of a cessation theology. That is not a vital issue for our congregations at this time.

Avoiding and Undermining

However, there is another issue that is absolutely central to the struggles of our congregations—to talk clearly and openly about the ways in which we decide whether a particular point of view is guided by God’s Spirit or not.

I would put forward that we’re not sure how to do that. Sometimes a process of discernment or authoritative interpretation of Scripture has been used abusively to enforce or hide existing sins and to avoid following God’s leading into new areas. At the same time the reaction to that stagnant process has been for individuals to insist that their personal point of view is the will of God simply because they passionately believe it to be true.

This can become a way of avoiding or undermining others who do not share that point of view and shuts off all avenues of conversation and dialogue. At best, speaking that way is shorthand for much longer and more involved process. At worst it is either denying that we are distinct individuals from the spiritual and other personalities around us, or it is a method of denying, ignoring, or working around the discerning process of scripture and prayerful discussion in the church.

Both of those tendencies are equally anti-Christian.

Opened or Closed Doors?

With due respect to the difficult struggle among our conference leaders on this issue, I wonder whether retracting an invitation to someone intending to speak to a group of church leaders opened doors of communication or closed them. The decision to publish Cary’s article certainly opened those doors. This published conversation would not be happening were it not for the article.

However, the decision to pull back the invitation and cancel the event sends a clear message that some conversations are not appropriate to engage in. If one of the conversations that is not appropriate to have among church leaders involves if and how we discern God’s leading in our lives, we have fallen into error.

Also Personal

I can spend a lot of energy on this question from a point of view of view of theology and history, but it’s also personal for me. If I believed every voice in my own mind that claimed to be from the Spirit of God or sounded like it was from the Spirit of God, I would have ended my own life many times and taken other actions to hurt or destroy relationships or do physical and emotional damage to myself and others.

It’s not always so serious or dramatic. I’m a guitar player and, even though I have several instruments, recently I have

been lusting over a beautiful Gibson ES175 which the voices in my mind are insistent I would use for nothing other than praising the Lord and edifying his Church—so surely the several thousand dollars are worth it.

The inside of my head is a cacophony of voices saying this and that and the next thing at different levels of volume and intensity. Thankfully, I have been saved from most serious consequences not by mysterious intervention directly by the hand of God or yet another voice in my mind, but, as Cary suggests, through reading, scripture, music, and hearing the advice of others whom I respect either through their writings or their personal counsel.

I don’t want to project my experience directly onto my congregation or our conference, but I am here to say emphatically that not every voice that claims to be the Spirit of God and sounds like the Spirit of God is the Spirit of God. Scripture invites and requires that we test and discern in the Christian community so that we are not deceived by the multitude of voices around us and within us.

Hope Remains

I think hope remains. Although the article caused a controversy and the controversy led to shutting down a particular opportunity for conversation, that process has itself started new conversations. We have a second chance. Nobody likes having their knees knocked out from under them. Cary’s critiques and style may make some people feel like he is accusing people of having invalid faith experiences.

Maybe what needs to come out of this discussion is an increased emphasis on scriptural discernment within the Church. Once that foundation has been rebuilt we can start working at moving over to it, rather than simply bashing the experience that people have come to rely on. *Θ*

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Responding to Spiritual Experiences



Kevin Wiebe

Kevin Wiebe is the pastor of New Life Christian Fellowship (Tilbury/Stevenson, Ont.), a member of the BCM, and assistant editor of *Theodidaktos*. He holds a BA (Communications and Media) from Providence University College. Adapted from a longer article that remains available online and in print (*Theodidaktos*, July 2016), this is not a direct response to Dr. Cary's article, but, amid "many tense relationships and troubled hearts, I humbly offer some thoughts."

IF WE AS CHRISTIANS have a kind of spiritual experience, we may wonder whether it is a prompting from the Holy Spirit and how to process that experience. If it was God speaking to us, how do we know it was truly Him? Jesus figuratively describes his disciples as sheep who follow his voice (John 10).

For believers, the question is not whether or not God exists or still leads us today. That much is presupposed. The question is rather *how*. How does God speak to us today? Only in the Bible? Through the whims of our imagination? If we have some kind of spiritual experience, how do we know if we are hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, or if we are simply fabricating our own spiritual experience based on subjective personal desires?

Two Sides of the Coin

I used to have a pastor named Peter Fehr that would rarely answer my polarized questions directly. Instead, he would often wisely answer me by offering "two sides of the coin" for me to consider. I would like to follow in footsteps of Pastor Fehr and offer you "two sides of the coin," or two extremes that I believe are important to avoid as we contemplate this topic together.

One Extreme: Lifeless Religion

One extreme in responding to work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our world is



ISTOCK

If we have some kind of spiritual experience, how do we know if we are hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, or if we are simply fabricating our own spiritual experience based on subjective personal desires?

to deny the Spirit's work altogether. While this extreme will typically acknowledge the Bible as important, the work of the Spirit can be blatantly ignored or totally denied.

In the Bible we see that fear is a typical response to an encounter with

God and in some cases this resulted in people distancing themselves from God. In Exodus 20:18–21 we see the Israelites responding to an encounter with God by demanding that Moses should talk to God on their behalf because they were afraid. They made human barriers to keep

the Lord at arm's length. Sometimes we likewise create rules and forms of lifeless religion to help us do the same thing, insulating us from God.

Confuses Relationships with Formulas

What this extreme does is confuse living relationships with concepts and formulas. Instead of worshipping the living God, we end up worshipping systems, rules, and a lifeless religion of our own making. While rituals and religious systems can be tremendously helpful for us in our worship of the Lord, utilizing them to worship God is much different than falling into a worship of the rituals themselves.

If we only know about God without actually knowing and experiencing God, our faith is essentially worthless. Jesus talks about the future day of judgment where people will come to him who only *appear* to be his disciples (Matthew 7:21–23). His response to these individuals is

If we only know about God without actually knowing and experiencing God, our faith is essentially worthless.

sobering. He will say, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”

These individuals apparently never had a relationship with Jesus. It seems that it takes more than religion or outward action; it takes a relationship with Jesus, which will require some sort of personal encounter with the Lord.

This Doesn't Mean

This does *not* mean that if we become a bit legalistic that we are somehow no longer Christians. Nor does it mean

that we are unsaved because we don't dramatically “hear God's voice” as claimed by other people.

What this passage does, however, is provide a stark warning against relying on our own religious systems to get us into heaven. It is a warning to people in both extremes to come back to Jesus. We must not settle for a religion that worships rules and formulas—keeping a true relationship with God at bay. But neither should we settle for a religion that worships subjective or even manufactured experiences. Encounters with Jesus are necessary for this relationship, but the nature of that encounter, and the extremes we may see around us, are the point of this discussion.

Another Extreme: Endless Subjectivity

The other extreme is one that has little regard for the truths found in the Bible, and attaches an authoritative, “Thus saith the Lord” to anything one wants. It conflates and confuses one's individual thoughts or feelings with the very voice of God, leading to endless subjectivity about the will, word, and work of the Holy Spirit. For people caught in this extreme, the truths of the Bible are often denied in favour of fanciful visions and dreams. Interestingly, this extreme is also prone to idolatry. Rather than worshipping systems and rules, it worships dramatic and emotional experiences in place of the Lord, exchanging objective truth for subjective interpretations of experience.

Consider an example from the world news of 2016 of a man who was touring a South African national park with his church group when they came upon a pride of lions feeding on an impala. He got out of the vehicle and attempted to use the Holy Spirit to miraculously control the wild animals.

He was attacked and was taken to hospital for emergency surgery. He said,

The other extreme is one that has little regard for the truths found in the Bible, and attaches an authoritative, “Thus saith the Lord” to anything one wants.

“I do not know what came over me... I thought the Lord wanted to use me to show his power over animals.” Obviously he misunderstood, which led to a physical injury, though perhaps his ego may have been hurt more than his body.

Holy Hunches

In a book called *Holy Hunches*, Bruce Main writes, “Sincere, pious, churchgoing people have acted on hunches that have brought scores of people destruction and ill will. Hunches have burned innocent people at the stake, sparked crusades, and led to genocide—all justified by someone's interpretation of God's calling.”

Because of the great danger of us getting things wrong, but inspired by the possibility of us getting it right, Main refers to listening for nudges of God as a “holy hunch,” a term both hopeful and humble. Main is open to God's leading but also desires people to be cognizant of the damage that is possible.

False Prophets

It can be dangerous to brazenly declare that we have heard a message from God. This is not a new phenomenon; it also occurred in ancient Israel. Jeremiah 23:38–40 addresses false prophets when it says, “Although you claim, ‘This is a message from the Lord,’ this is what the Lord says: You used the words, ‘This is a message from the Lord,’ even though I told you that you must not claim, ‘This is a message from the Lord.’”

Oracles of severe punishment follow this statement for these false prophets. Just because one thinks that something is from the Lord does not necessarily make it so. Given the danger of misunderstanding spiritual experiences, one would be wise to be careful about how or if we claim something was from God.

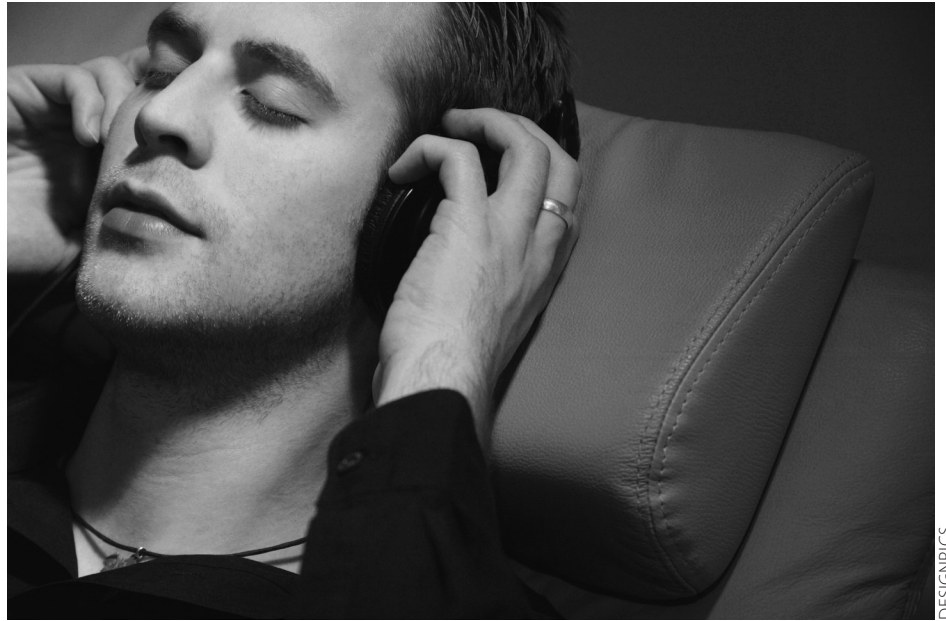
All Kinds of Ways

In our response to what we suspect to be an encounter with God, we have the capacity to follow God's leading to become His hands and feet in the world. There are many examples in the Old and New Testaments of God somehow communicating things to people in all kinds of ways leading to powerful ministry. If we are not careful, however, we could also become conduits of destruction because we let our own ideas get in the way of God's.

Possible Ways Forward

In an article from *The Gospel Coalition*, Andrew Wilson offers several practical suggestions for better discerning what is and is not the voice of the Lord. To summarize, Wilson says we must check these experiences against the teaching of the Scriptures, against the character of Jesus as revealed in the Bible, that we should consult with our own spiritual leaders, church communities and on top of that examine the fruit of the experience.

Each of those points could be elaborated upon greatly. Suffice it to say, however, that these measures help prevent believers from being entirely subjective, providing some helpful safeguards against misinterpreting the voice of the Lord, and discerning if something is or is not from God. These measures also encourage believers to actively listen for the voice of God, in our experiences, church tradition and community, and especially in the Scriptures.



DESIGNPICS

These measures also encourage believers to actively listen for the voice of God, in our experiences, church tradition and community, and especially in the Scriptures.

Continue Seeking The Lord

So how do we respond to what seems to be an encounter with God? Ignoring it out of fear is not a helpful option. Neither is blindly assuming that all such experiences are actually from God. In reference to 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22, Francis Chan writes in *Forgotten God*, “Some conservatives may quench the Spirit by ignoring His working, but surely putting unbiblical words into the mouth of God is a form of quenching the Spirit as well.”

I believe that we must live in the tension created by these two extremes: refusing to ignore the authority of the Scripture on the one hand, and on the other hand refusing to ignore the voice of the Good Shepherd when he does, in fact, speak.

For some, moving forward might mean living more humbly, recognizing that God's will is often drastically different

from our own and submitting our experiences to the authority of the Bible. For others moving forward might mean to live more boldly, stepping out in faith when the Holy Spirit leads.

For all believers, this means responding to God's voice when He calls, however he calls—responding and discerning not just as individuals, but as parts of a larger Christian community. So, by all means, listen for the voice of God both in the Bible and through the “holy hunches” given by the Spirit of God. Be bold, but also be humble that our lives may be truly obedient to the Lord and avoid the idolatry of both extremes. **✠**

Discerning God's Voice: Two Diverse Approaches, Three Key Characteristics



Dr. Rob Reimer

Rob Reimer has been the president of Steinbach Bible College since 2007, having served previously as an executive director in camping ministry, as a youth pastor, and as a senior pastor. He holds a two-year Diploma in Biblical Studies (WBI), BA (U. of W.), MDiv (MBBS), and DMin (Fuller). He is an ordained MB minister.

THE PAST WEEKS HAVE been filled with conversations regarding the SBC Leadership Conference. This article is a response addressing some of the concerns and support expressed regarding the

conference. This article is not intended to exhaustively address the issue. Authors have written many books on the topic. This will not be a book, but a short overview.

There are few things that bring a bigger smile to my face than when people earnestly seek after God. It is one of the greatest joys that I have as President of Steinbach Bible College; to see students grapple with faith issues. One of those faith issues that has recently garnered much attention is in the area of hearing from God.

Two Diverse Approaches

As I listen to people talk about this faith issue, I

sometimes hear two diverse approaches. The first approach says that all I have to do is become quiet, listen for God's voice for a few minutes and then whatever impressions I receive must be what God is telling me to do. The formula is simple: become quiet for a short time, and then God will give me an impression that is absolute.

The second approach says that God doesn't speak to me personally, but only through the written Word. This formula says that for every decision I need to make, God will automatically give me a verse and somehow that verse will fit my situation. So, what happens is that I read a verse for my devotions and somehow try to manipulate that verse to fit my personal situation.

Both perspectives have components that I need to incorporate into my life as I hear from God, and both have cause for concern. To throw out either perspective



DESIGNPICS

I believe that there are many ways that God speaks to us today. We typically have our “go-to” methods. Subsequently, it can be easy to assume that the way God speaks to me is the only way or ways that God speaks to all of us today.

would short-change the process while seeking to hear from God. I believe that a better alternative would be to incorporate both and seek a more balanced approach to hear from God.

How Do We Hear From God?

I believe that there are many ways that God speaks to us today. We typically have our “go-to” methods. Subsequently, it can be easy to assume that the way God speaks to me is the only way or ways that God speaks to all of us today.

As I think of a list of ways God speaks to us, I realize that some of these methods I have experienced personally, while others I have not experienced at all. However, just because I have experienced them, or not experienced them, does not make them right or wrong, or the only way to hear God. The reality is that God speaks to his children in a variety of ways.

There are three characteristics that I personally have experienced as I have sought to hear God. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. This is simply sharing my experience.

Time Seeking God

The first characteristic deals with the amount of time I spend in seeking God (1 Corinthians 2:9–16). There seems to be a direct correlation between the amount of time I wait on God, and how well I hear from God. When I only spend a few minutes or a short amount of time listening to God, I tend to “mishear” Him. Maybe it is just me, but that has been my experience.

However, when I dedicate myself to prayer and wait patiently on Him for direction and discernment, I tend to “get it right” more often than not.

Have you ever wondered why that seems to be the case? I think the answer lies in the fact that a big part of hearing from God is simply the process. God wants us to spend time in communion and fellowship with him. Our goal for

hearing from God is more about the relationship that we have with Him than simply getting an answer on what to do next.

God seeks a deep and vibrant relationship, not a vending machine approach to answered prayer. When we become silent for 10 minutes and expect to hear a word from God, we risk turning this relationship into a formula. That does not mean that spending 10 minutes in silence is a waste of time; far from it. However, I believe a better way is to focus on building our relationship with God over a lifetime. Then we will be amazed at how God continually speaks to us.

So, how do we hear from God? I believe a biblical approach is to put less focus and emphasis on a formula, and more on relationships.

The Body of Believers

A second characteristic involves the body of believers (Colossians 3:16). My experience has been that I tend to hear God better when I do it in the context of other believers. That is not to say that God only speaks to me when I am with others. I do sense God’s leading when I am alone.

However, for the key decisions of life, I find that I hear God better when other believers are involved. I ask them to join me in prayer. I share how I feel God leading me and ask for their input as they join me in prayer. I invite them to pray with me over a period of days and weeks, not only for 10 minutes.

My home church is in the process of setting direction for the future. As a whole church we are committing to 10 weeks of prayer. We are encouraged to write down our thoughts over this 10-week period. Then we will look at these


thoughts and see where the Holy Spirit is leading. I really believe this is a healthy way of listening to God. We are working at building our relationship with God and with each other as we join together in hearing from God (Matthew 22:34–40).

The Use of Scripture

A third characteristic involves the use of Scripture (Romans 10:17). My personal experience has been that when I immerse myself in Scripture, it has a profound impact on my hearing from God. To immerse requires more than reading a chapter and pulling out one verse that seems to stand out. It means reading large portions of Scripture in one sitting. It means reading passages repeatedly.

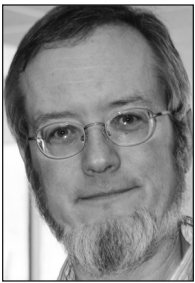
As a former pastor, one of the most profound challenges I gave to the congregation was to read through an Epistle or Gospel every week for a seven-week period. It was not uncommon for individuals to tell me that Scripture came alive for them, and that God spoke to them in powerful ways. Hearing from God involves reading Scripture, lots of Scripture.

So, how do we hear from God? I believe a biblical approach is to put less focus and emphasis on a formula, and more on relationships. Let’s commit to spending a significant amount of time developing our relationship with God. Let’s involve others who are godly and mature believers. Let’s immerse ourselves in Scripture. If this becomes our emphasis, I truly believe that we will be better “hearers” of God.

I want to invite you to join me in further study and dialogue as we earnestly seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in becoming more attuned to hearing from God. 



The Holy Spirit and the Shape of Christian Experience



Dr. Phillip Cary

Dr. Phillip Cary is Professor of Philosophy at Eastern University and Scholar in Residence at the Templeton Honors College at Eastern University. He holds a BA in English Literature and Philosophy (Washington U.), MA in Philosophy (Yale), PhD in Philosophy and Religious Studies (Yale).

FIRST OF ALL, LET ME thank you all for inviting me into this conversation, where we may think together—surely not without the presence of the Holy Spirit—about the things of God given us in the word of Christ. The courtesy, courage, and kindness with which you invite me in, after my previous article struck a nerve in so many people, is a gift as well as a challenge to me.

When I wrote it I was trying to present good news, so it is dismaying to find just how ignorant I was of the audience I was addressing. I hope now to make amends, though I expect what I write this time around will still require a great deal of your patience.

What the article aimed to criticize was simply an idea, a teaching that is bad for us. The problem is that the teaching

is a practical idea, which means that in criticizing the idea I am criticizing a *practice*—one that many people like and engage in. What's more, the practice is meant to produce a particular kind of *experience*. I wanted to keep the critical focus on the idea, but I should have realized that criticizing the idea would inevitably be heard as criticizing the experience, and that was sure to sting.

I wish I could apologize in person to those who felt stung, and begin the conversation anew from there.

A Risk in Talking of Experience

Unfortunately it is now my job to tell you what I think in writing—and why I think it, which means I will be giving you reasons to think the practice is wrong. I will also need to take the risk of talking directly about Christian experience,

This strikes me as an astonishingly bad idea to impose on adolescents, most of whom are confused enough already about the mob of voices competing for attention in their hearts. Coming to real self-knowledge about what is within us is a long, arduous task of moral wisdom that most adolescents have barely begun, and telling them they have to figure out which of the voices in their hearts is God does not help.

I will be asking you not to change your experience, but rather to think about your experience differently—to understand and interpret Christian experience in what (I will argue) is a more biblical way.

to those who do not think about their experiences the same way I do about mine. So I must ask for your patience as I write about these things as briefly and clearly as I can, which also means, unfortunately, rather bluntly.

I will be asking you not to change your experience, but rather to think about your experience differently—to understand and interpret Christian experience in what (I will argue) is a more biblical way. I will proceed to connect this to how we understand the work of the Holy Spirit among us, as taught in Scripture. But first I need to make clear the kind of practice I am objecting to.

The Practice of Inner “Listening”

It is a practice that was taught to my son years ago in his youth group, and I objected to it then as well. They were told to go off, each by themselves, and pray about something that was on their mind or some decision they had to make, then be quiet and “listen” for what God would tell them about it, and then thank God for whatever he had just told them. They were being trained, in short, to hear God’s voice in their hearts.

I can see the results of this bad idea in the confusions and anxieties of many of my students, who are just a little older than my son was then. They have been taught to take this practice as normative for the Christian life, as if this were how to learn the will of God. Most of them are biblically illiterate and could not name all Ten Commandments if their life depended on it, but they’ve been trained to find God’s will by turning to their own ill-informed hearts.

Their anxieties are a sign of their trouble. They are stuck with unanswerable questions that take the form, “how do you know?” In the first course I ever taught at my university, one Christian student explained to me in a philosophy paper why the concept of divine revelation didn’t really make sense to her—because how can you tell which voice is really *God’s* voice?

How do you know? And if you can’t know, then how can God really reveal anything? I realized, with a bit of a shock, that it just hadn’t occurred to this evangelical student that she could find divine revelation in holy Scripture. She had been taught something quite different

from the old Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*, that “Scripture alone” was the source of revelation and the knowledge of God’s will.

Asking the Right Questions

As a philosophy teacher, I have learned to take persistent, unanswerable “How do you know?” questions as a symptom of something gone wrong in our thinking. They are typical questions of modern philosophy and its inward turn, rather than the ancient church and its love for God and neighbour. When you think along with the Ancient Church, you get better questions.

You don’t ask the modern question (in language which I have not found before the 19th century), “How do I know if this is *the Spirit’s leading?*” Instead, you ask questions like, “Is this the best thing to do?” “Is this really in obedience to God’s commandments?” and “Will this thing I want to do for my neighbours really be good for them?” You turn your heart’s attention away from your heart and toward God and your neighbour. You ask especially about *the good* of your neighbour, because that is the kind of question that love asks.

Solomon Sought Wisdom

It is also the kind of question that wisdom asks. Think of the wisdom Solomon asked for when he prayed to be given an understanding heart to discern between good and bad (1 Kings 3:9). He needed to get good at recognizing the difference between good decisions and bad ones. As a young king, he found himself in the same kind of position as the steward in our Lord’s parable: put in charge of immense wealth, he must learn to make good decisions about how to invest what has been given him for the good of the kingdom, as a steward invests his talents for the good of the household he manages.

In Scripture, neither steward nor king search their own hearts to find the

Lord's leading. Their task is to exercise the wisdom that discerns between good and bad, between wise decisions and foolish ones, for the good of the people over whom they have authority.

Therefore Solomon's understanding heart is literally a "hearing" or "obedient" heart. In Hebrew as in other ancient languages, "obedience" is related to hearing (the English word comes ultimately from the same Latin root as "audio"). And you can see why. Solomon's wisdom means that he must, as the Lord tells him, "walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments" (1 Kings 3:14).

In short, he must hear God's word and obey it, if he is to be good for the people of Israel. He hears this in a dream, of course, but dreams come unbidden and unasked, not through a practice of listening for God's voice in your heart. And the statutes and commandments that Solomon must hear, learn and keep are external words that do not come from his own heart.

Directing Our Attention

A great deal depends therefore on where we turn our attention. The Holy Spirit is in the business of making sanctified hearts, which means hearts that turn their attention outward in love toward God and neighbour. There is a time for paying attention to ourselves in the hard work of coming to self-knowledge, which requires a great deal of repentance and confession of sin. But aside from that, the Spirit forms us inwardly in the image of Christ mainly by directing the attention of our hearts away from our hearts, first toward the word of God, by which God gives himself to us in Christ, and second toward our neighbours.

This outward turn is inwardly formative, because it is how we take things to heart. When the churches are doing their job, we learn God's words

by heart like a favourite song. Christ is thus formed in us, as the apostle says (Galatians 4:19), because the word of Christ abides in us after getting into our hearts through our ears.

Even in the hour of our death, if our senses fail and we can no longer speak aloud, we will be able to repeat the Lord's Prayer in our hearts and thus be strengthened by the power of his external

The Spirit forms us inwardly in the image of Christ mainly by directing the attention of our hearts away from our hearts, first toward the word of God, by which God gives himself to us in Christ, and second toward our neighbours.

word that has come to abide within us. It is not God's voice—just as it is not God's voice but our own when we pray it aloud—but it is quite surely God's word. There's no "How do you know?" about it.

Inside and Outside

In one sense this is an *either/or*, because it is a matter of how we direct our attention. Attention has a focus like a camera: when you focus on one thing, you leave other things in the background. So when you focus your love on your neighbour, then your own heart and its feelings may be part of the picture, but they're in the background. For you can't really focus on what is inside you and outside you at the same time.

Yet there is a *both/and* aspect to this as well, because the inner goes along with the outer. Our hearts are inwardly renewed as we turn our attention outward to care about what is other than ourselves. Turning outward is therefore not a way of neglecting inward growth in love. Quite the contrary: you build up your inner life

in Christ by loving something other than your inner life.

This *both/and* is particularly important for our emotions, which spring from what we love. (Isn't it lovely how we *love* to pay attention to what we love! That's one of the most important things emotion does for us). Think of when you're listening to music that deeply moves you. If you start focusing on how deeply you're moved, you will be turning your attention away from the music itself, and that will actually weaken the emotion or turn it into sentimentality and narcissism, like watching yourself in the mirror.

The Shape of Christian Experience

Or so it seems in my experience. See if you would advise me differently about this. A few weeks ago I broke down weeping in church as we started singing the passion-hymn, *Ah precious Jesus, how hast thou offended*

Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou
offended,
that we to judge thee have in hate
pretended?
By foes derided, by thine own rejected,
O most afflicted!

Who was the guilty? Who brought this
upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone
thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied
thee;
I crucified thee.

Lo, the Good Shepherd for the sheep
is offered;
the slave hath sinned, and the Son hath
suffered.
For our atonement, while we nothing
heeded,
God interceded.

For me, kind Jesus, was thy
incarnation,

thy mortal sorrow, and thy life's
oblation;
thy death of anguish and thy bitter
passion,
for my salvation.

Therefore, kind Jesus, since I cannot
pay thee,
I do adore thee, and will ever pray
thee,
think on thy pity and thy love
unswerving,
not my deserving.

(Johann Heerman, d. 1647)

Should I have been asking the *How do you know* question—trying to tell whether this was really the Spirit working in my heart? I don't think so. I just don't think it's an interesting question to ask. What I want to know is something different.

I want to know this precious Jesus we're singing about, who shed his blood for me and for the sins of the whole world. And I'm quite convinced that's what the Holy Spirit wants me to know as well. Trying to listen for the Spirit in my heart at that moment would be disobedience and narcissism, turning my attention away from Christ. It's a way of directing attention that weakens rather than nourishes Christian experience.

When we get emotional and worship with gladness or weeping, I believe it's because over the years we've learned, by the inner teaching of the Holy Spirit, to embrace our precious Jesus in the Gospel as it is preached and taught and sung, to the glory of God the Father. This is why I've never understood it when people talk about the external word as if it were something lifeless and inert, impersonal and unemotional, sitting dead on a page rather than alive in our hearts.

I'm talking about the Gospel here, the kind and gracious word by which God gives us nothing less than Jesus Christ in person, like a king giving his own beloved Son as our bridegroom. If we're not rejoicing in this, we're missing something.

If you want to see the Spirit at work, look not into your own heart but at the life of the church when the word of Christ dwells among us richly.

In this respect God is like all the other people we love: they dwell in our hearts precisely because we pay attention to what is outside our hearts. It is especially important to listen to their words—external words that tell us who they are, as the Gospel tells us who Christ is. We have the people we love in our hearts because our attention is turned outward, even in the moments when we are praying silently or thinking of them in the inner voice of our hearts.

The Spirit in the Church

My proposal to you is that this outward turn of attention is the essential shape of Christian experience, precisely because that is what the Spirit is up to when he works inwardly in our hearts. Seeing an inward turn in Scripture is looking in the wrong direction. If you want to see the Spirit at work, look not into your own heart but at the life of the church when the word of Christ dwells among us richly (Colossians 3:16), which is what it means for us to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18–19).

These are two ways of describing the same phenomenon: the church gathered in the Spirit for the hearing of the word, “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,” as both passages put it. When Paul talks of the Spirit “dwelling in you” (Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 3:16) he is speaking to the church, always using the pronoun “you” in the plural (the Greek equivalent of “you guys” or “you all”). The exception proves the rule: writing to Timothy individually, he urges him to “guard the good deposit by the Holy Spirit indwelling in us” (2 Timothy 1:14). It seems never to occur to him to think of the Holy Spirit apart from the life he

shares with others in the Body of Christ.

Likewise, when people are described as “filled with the Spirit” in the Book of Acts, that is practically a technical term for saying: they prophesied, speaking external words that instructed the people of God in the ways of Christ (Acts 2:4, 4:8, 4:31, 13:9; cf. Luke 1:41, 1:67). So also when the Holy Spirit instructs the church in Acts 13:2, it is in the context of worship, where there are prophets present (Acts 13:1).

The Prophets

I think we are to assume that, as the creed says, the Spirit was speaking through the prophets, as happened also throughout the Old Testament. Notice that nothing is said about the *experience* of the prophets in this passage. The interest of Scripture is elsewhere, in the word the prophets have to give God's people.

The one thing we can be sure of about the experience of the prophets is that they are gripped by the word they are given to say, which is no doubt why they don't often tell us about their experience—they're too busy paying attention to the word and what it says. They sometimes speak of dreams and visions (again, things that come unbidden, not because they make a practice of “listening for God”) and when they do mention what they're feeling, it's usually something like terror, anger or anguish (like Ezekiel 3:14, “The Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit”).

Pentecost

What the experience is like when it goes well can be seen writ large, I think, on the day of Pentecost, when we hear nothing

of what it felt like to be one of the people speaking in tongues, but we have a long passage describing the experience of people hearing the Gospel preached in their own language, their astonishment and perplexity (Acts 2:7–12). The hearing of the Gospel is the essential Pentecostal experience. The church can survive without speaking in tongues, but it is born with the preaching of the Gospel and dies without it.

The Spirit and the Word

This is particularly important in 1 Corinthians 12, which is about the variety of spiritual gifts, many of which involve speaking in and to the congregation (the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, prophecy, and also

tongues and interpretation, as described in 1 Corinthians 14), and all of which, without exception, are “manifestations of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7) rather than for private use. As diverse members of the one body, none of us are expected to do everything the whole body does, and not every local congregation will be exercising all the gifts of the Spirit all the time.

What they will be doing, unless they are spiritually dead, is hearing, obeying and rejoicing in the Gospel, by which the whole body shares in the life of its head, which is Christ our Lord. It is a great irony when this passage affirming the diversity of spiritual gifts is used to impose a one-size-fits-all spiritual practice—especially when it is a practice

that Paul never mentions and has evidently never heard of, such as the inward turn that was taught to my son in his youth group.

I think it is therefore good news that we do not have to be subject to such practices, because they are not taught in Holy Scripture. I would put it even more strongly: because Christian doctrine ought to be based on Scripture alone, no one has the authority to teach such a practice to others as a requirement of the Christian life. Believers have a right to be protected from the kind of psychological invasiveness that you would never stand for in ordinary life—like when someone comes up to you and starts commenting on your inner self and telling you what feelings you are supposed to have.

Unfortunately, group dynamics can be quite successful in this kind of psychological invasiveness. It can create a kind of social pressure you will recognize if you’ve ever felt like there must be something inwardly wrong with you because you’re not feeling the same way as everyone else in the room.

It’s the kind of pressure that moves an excited crowd, an angry political rally or a drug-fueled rock concert, when anyone who wants to sit quietly and think critically about what’s happening looks way out of place. The power of group dynamics is that it can make you *feel* out of place, just because you’re not feeling what everyone else thinks you’re supposed to be feeling.

The apostle’s description of the gifts of the Spirit in action has no place for that kind of group dynamics. He does not try to make Christians feel that there’s something wrong with them if they’re not hearing the voice of God in their hearts. His focus is on the external words that build up the church (1 Corinthians 14:12, 19, 26). That is plainly the Spirit’s focus, and it ought to be ours as well. That’s one of the things we learn, I think, when we base Christian teaching, practice, and experience on the Word of God. θ

It is a great irony when this passage affirming the diversity of spiritual gifts is used to impose a one-size-fits-all spiritual practice—especially when it is a practice that Paul never mentions and has evidently never heard of.

For Further Reading

Phillip Cary, *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 practical things you don't have to do* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010).

Provides an in-depth presentation of the main points in this article.

Garry Friesen and J. Robin Maxson, *Decision-making and the Will of God: a Biblical alternative to the traditional view*, 2nd ed. (Portland OR: Multnomah, 2004).

A massive, best-selling, painstakingly careful and fair-minded Scriptural exposition showing that biblical decision-making is based on a “wisdom view” rather than on listening for God in our hearts. My only important disagreement is with the notion that the latter view is “traditional,” whereas I think it is less than two centuries old.

Gerald Sittser, *The Will of God as a Way of Life: finding and following the will of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

A deeply humane book that conveys, in an especially pastorally way, the key theological points against the practice of turning to your own heart to hear from God.

Book Review

With Open Hands, Henri J. M. Nouwen (1972; reprinted Ave Maria, 2006). \$10.95. 128 pp. ISBN 978-1-59471-064-3. Reviewed by Pastor Kevin Wiebe, BA, of New Life Christian Fellowship (Tilbury/Stevenson, Ont.) who serves on the BCM.

OFTEN BOOK REVIEWS in *Theodidaktos* are of new or newish books. This book, however, is not a new one at all. More than four decades have gone by since it was written, yet as this issue of *Theodidaktos* is dedicated to the discussion of prayer and hearing from God, I could think of no better book to bring to your attention than this one: *With Open Hands* by Henri Nouwen.

I discovered this book in the clearance book section of a small used bookshop in the Saint Boniface area of Winnipeg, and it has become one of my favourite volumes on the topic of prayer.

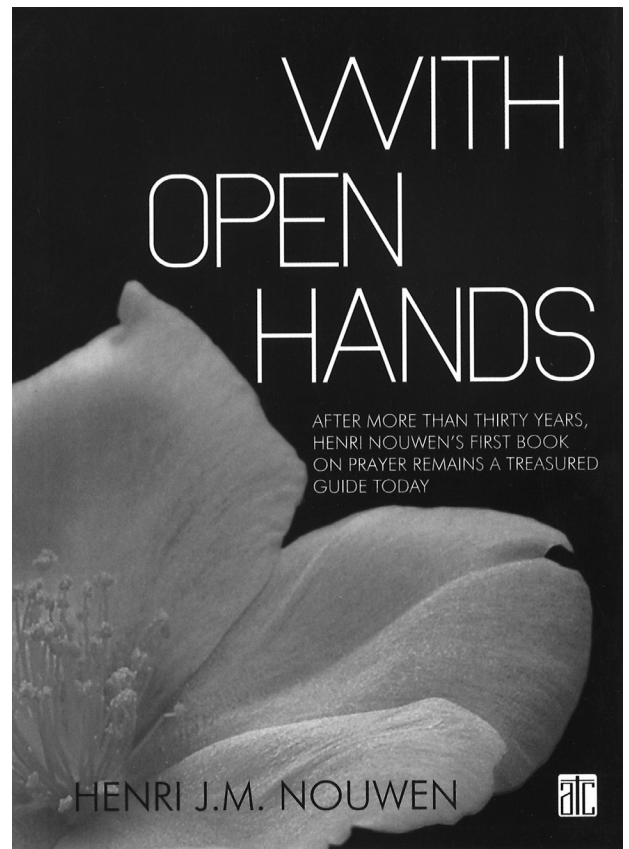
With Open Hands is not a book of heady theology, nor is it a practical guide about how to pray. It is more about the disposition of prayer than it is about models for prayer. It is more about removing the barriers we put between ourselves and God than it is about figuring out and nailing down the intricacies about how God communicates with humanity. It is more about seeking a relationship with the Divine than it

is about categorizing the ways in which relationships work out.

The main illustration of the book pertains to the metaphor of our hands. It begins with the illustration of us praying with clenched fists, refusing to let go of certain things out of fear. By the end the illustration is of praying with open hands (hence the title of the book), freely giving our lives to God as a living sacrifice, trusting the Lord with every part of our being.

I have found that in rigorous academic study one can get incredibly wrapped up in the “for” or “against” camps pertaining to a given topic. During my theological training I found I was so wrapped up in the various theological arguments of the Scriptures that I found reading the Bible difficult. I seemed to lose sight of

***With Open Hands* is a book that helped reinvigorate my own prayer life, not as a formula for success as if God were some vending machine, but rather as something that awakened a desire in me to give all of myself to the Lord and to spend time with Him in prayer.**



its life-giving nature. In the same way, when spending time examining different people’s convictions on prayer it may be easy to neglect time spent *in* prayer.

With Open Hands is a book that helped reinvigorate my own prayer life, not as something academic but as something important and vibrant—not as a formula for success as if God were some vending machine, but rather as something that awakened a desire in me to give all of myself to the Lord and to spend time with Him in prayer. I found this book to be personally inspiring. Something about it resonated very deeply with me, and I highly recommend this book to anyone, ministers and lay people alike. ☺

The Final Word

P RAYER IS THE ONLY ENTRYWAY INTO GENUINE self-knowledge. It is also the main way we experience deep change—the reordering of our loves. Prayer is how God gives us so many of the unimaginable things he has for us. Indeed, prayer makes it safe for God to give us many of the things we most desire. It is the way we know God, the way we finally treat God as God. Prayer is simply the key to everything we need to do and be in life.

We must learn to pray. We have to.

Edmund P. Clowney wrote, “The Bible does not present an art of prayer; it presents the God of prayer.” We should not decide how to pray based on the experiences and feelings we want. Instead, we should do everything possible to behold our God as he is, and prayer will follow. The more clearly we grasp who God is, the more our prayer is shaped and determined accordingly.

Timothy J. Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2014), 18, 62. Timothy Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. He has also written *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* and *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*.

Send editorial inquiries and submissions to Editor, *Theodidaktos*, Box 129, Kleefeld, MB R0A 0V0; kleefeldrev89@gmail.com; 204-377-4773 or kevin.wiebe@yahoo.ca; 519-437-5428, Writing guidelines are available. Submissions should be accompanied by a photo and autobiographical information.

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