

three general problem areas that must be briefly addressed.

First, *we need to understand that God's communications come to us in many forms.* What we know about guidance and the divine-human encounter from the Bible and the lives of those who have gone before us shows us that. We should expect nothing else, for this variety is appropriate to the complexity of human personality and cultural history. And God in redeeming humanity is willing to reach out in whatever ways are suitable to its fallen and weakened condition. We should look carefully at these many forms to see which ones are most suited to the kind of relationship God intends to have with his people. If we give primacy to forms of communication that God does not on the whole prefer in relation to his children, that will hinder our understanding of and cooperation with his voice—perhaps even totally frustrating his will for us. One of the main tasks of the chapters that follow is to prevent this.

Second, *we may have the wrong motives for seeking to hear from God.* We all in some measure share in the general human anxiety about the future. By nature we live in the future, constantly hurled into it whether we like it or not. Knowing what we will meet there is a condition of our being prepared to deal with it—or so it would seem from the human point of view. Francis Bacon's saying that knowledge is power is never more vividly realized than in our concern about our own future. So we ceaselessly inquire about events to come. The great businesses and the halls of government are filled today with experts and technocrats, our modern-day magicians and soothsayers. A discipline of "futurology" has emerged within the universities. The age-old trades of palm reading and fortune telling flourish.⁶

Within the Christian community this leads to a prominence of teaching on the will of God and how to know it. Russ Johnston draws upon his own wide experience to remark how this continues to be one of the most popular subjects,

A certain church I know has elective Sunday School classes for their adults. Every three months they choose a new topic to study. The pastor tells me that if they can have someone teach on knowing God's will, they can run that class over and over, and still people sign up for it in droves.

I've spoken at many conferences where part of the afternoons are set aside for workshops on various topics. If you make one of the workshops "Knowing the Will of God," half the people sign up for it even if there are twenty other choices.⁷

But a self-defeating motive is at work here. Seeking to know the future causes people to take these classes and workshops over and over without coming to peace about their place in the will of God.

I fear that many people seek to hear God solely as a device for obtaining their own safety, comfort and sense of being righteous. For those who busy themselves to know the will of God, however, it is still true that "those who want to save their life will lose it" (Mt 16:25). My extreme preoccupation with knowing God's will for me may only indicate, contrary to what is often thought, that I am overconcerned with myself, not a Christlike interest in the well-being of others or in the glory of God.

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Frederick B. Meyer writes, "So long as there is some thought of personal advantage, some idea of acquiring the praise and commendation of men, some aim of self-aggrandizement, it will be simply impossible to find out God's purpose concerning us."⁸ Nothing will go right in our effort to hear God if this false motivation is its foundation. God simply will not cooperate. We must discover a different type

of motivation for knowing God's will and listening to his voice.

Closely aligned to wanting to hear God only to know the future, some people want to have God's distinct instructions so they will not have to be responsible for their actions. But responsibility and initiative are the heart of our relationship with God. We are not robots, and he does not work with robots.

Third, *misconceiving the nature of our heavenly Father and of his intent for us creates a truly overwhelming problem* to block our understanding of God's communication with us as his redeemed children and friends. From this then comes a further misunderstanding of what the church, his redemptive community, is to be like and especially of how authority works in the kingdom of the heavens. Indeed, all human troubles come from thinking of God wrongly, which then means, thinking about ourselves wrongly.

God certainly is not a jolly good fellow, nor is he our buddy. But then neither are we intended by him to be robots wired into his instrument panel, puppets on his string or slaves dancing at the end of the whiplash of his command. Such ideas must not serve as the basis for our view of hearing God. As E. Stanley Jones observed,

Obviously God must guide us in a way that will develop spontaneity in us. The development of character, rather than direction in this, that, and the other matter, must be the primary purpose of the Father. He will guide us, but he won't override us. That fact should make us use with caution the method of sitting down with a pencil and a blank sheet of paper to write down the instructions dictated by God for the day. Suppose a parent would dictate to the child minutely everything he is to do during the day. The child would be stunted under that regime. The parent must guide in such a manner, and to the degree, that autonomous character, capable of making right decisions for itself, is produced. God does the same.⁹

A Conversational Relationship

The ideal for hearing from God is finally determined by who God is, what kind of beings we are and what a personal relationship between ourselves and God should be like. *Our failure to hear God has its deepest roots in a failure to understand, accept and grow into a conversational relationship with God*, the sort of relationship suited to friends who are mature personalities in a shared enterprise, no matter how different they may be in other respects.

It is within such a relationship that our Lord surely intends us to have, and to recognize readily, his voice speaking in our hearts as occasion demands. I believe that he has made ample provision for this in order to fulfill his mission as the Good Shepherd, which is to bring us life and life more abundantly. The abundance of life comes in following him, and “the sheep follow him because they know his voice” (Jn 10:4).

The next chapter begins to deal with these problem areas that confront our search for God’s voice by looking at some general but essential preliminary guidelines.

Some Topics for Reflection

1. Can a person be sure that God has not spoken to them? What events in your past life *could* have been messages from God? Reflect on the details of some of these events.
2. What is the paradox about hearing God discussed in this chapter? Do you find that the tension it sets up is present in your life and the lives of religious people around you?
3. What might be the drawbacks of having a conversational relationship with God? What kind of person would you expect to be less than enthusiastic about living in such a relationship?
4. What does it say about someone’s view of God that he or she uses the term *personal relationship* but there are no specific communications?

1. that God *would not* communicate with run-of-the-mill human beings by surrounding them with his presence and speaking to them
2. that he *does not* communicate with *them* in that way
3. that he *cannot* do so
4. that God *should not* communicate with individuals (motivated by the need to control the divine presence and word for what they sincerely regard as proper purposes)

I offer the following replies to these four negative responses.

Truth 1: God Would

When considering whether God would be with ordinary human beings in a conversational relationship, we must remember not to think of him in the likeness of any human dignitaries we know. The rich, the famous and the great among humanity are still severely limited in their powers of communication by the fact that they are merely human. They are narrowly limited in their ability to interact personally with others. So it is possible for them to be in intimate contact only with a small number of other people—even with all the wonders of modern communications technology. Their span of consciousness, their capacity to pay attention and the scope of their willpower permit nothing more.

Beyond such factual limitations, human greatness is often taken to mean, and essentially to *require*, having nothing to do with just ordinary people. This sort of greatness is seen as involving a certain exclusiveness, insularity or snobbishness. If we cannot clear our minds of such associations with greatness, we won't be able to imagine that the great God would talk to us. We will think of him as a dignitary who is too busy, too conscious of his status or too high up to communicate with us.

How hard it is for us to come to an adequate conception of the *lowliness* of God—of how his greatness is precisely what makes

him able, available and ready to hear and speak personally with his creatures!

This lowliness was at the very center of Jesus' teaching about God. In his actions and words Jesus made clear how totally accessible God is to the weak, to the downtrodden and castaway, to little children. "Let the children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Mt 19:14). Our Lord's phrase "such as these" includes many characteristics of children, but here I want to stress the element of unimportance. The humanly unimportant ones are important to God. God being who he is, and now revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, *we should be surprised if he does not speak to us.*

E. Stanley Jones has asked,

Does God guide? Strange if he didn't. The Psalmist asks: "He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eyes, shall he not see?" (Ps. 94:9). And I ask: "He that made the tongue and gave us power to communicate with one another, shall he not speak and communicate with us?" I do not believe that God our Father is a dumb, noncommunicative impersonality.⁴

Truth 2: God Does

What about those who believe that God just simply does not speak to *them*? Here we must consider, I believe, two separate lines along which the cause of their difficulty may be found.

Are we "in tune"? First of all, *the fact that we do not hear God does not mean that God is not speaking to us.* Even at our human level it is common for us not to hear those who speak to us. It has probably happened to most of us this very day. Someone spoke to us, but we did not know it, did not hear it. Moreover, we know that messages from radio and television programs are passing through our bodies and brains at all hours of the day: messages that an ap-

Chariots of fire. The king of Syria was at war with Israel, but every time he laid his battle plans, Elisha would tell them to the king of Israel. The king of Syria naturally supposed that there was an Israelite spy among his confidants, but his aides all denied it.

The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this; he called his officers and said to them, "Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?" Then one of his officers said, "No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber." (2 Kings 6:11-12)

The king of Syria did believe this and went right to the heart of the problem: "Get Elisha!"

He said, "Go and find where he is; I will send and seize him." He was told, "He is in Dothan." So he sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night, and surrounded the city.

When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, "Alas, master! What shall we do?" He replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them." Then Elisha prayed: "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:13-17)



Hearing God in Scripture

2 Kings 6:11-17

Prepare yourself to *receive from God*. Close your eyes and breathe out slowly. Ask God to give you an openness to hear whatever the Spirit wishes to bring to you today.

One great law for all who would be truly led by God's pillar of cloud and fire, is to take no step at the bidding of self-will or without the clear moving of the heavenly guide. Though the direction be new and the way seem beset with difficulty, there is never any risk provided we are only led of God. Each new advance needs separate and special authority from Him, and yesterday's guidance is not sufficient for today.⁸

This is a beautiful and helpful statement, *except* for what it seems to be saying about risk. In this respect it is not a completely accurate account of what it means to live with God's words in our lives. The immaturity of many Christians today is due to their adopting the attitude toward risk expressed in this statement as the *whole* truth about hearing from God.

Having adopted this attitude, we then mistakenly try to use our ability to hear God as a device for securing a life without risk. When it does not work—as it certainly will not—we begin attacking ourselves, someone else or even God for being a failure. Such a response partly explains why God remains humanity's greatest disappointment. Who doesn't have a grievance against him? In truth, we don't need to seek risk but we will never be without it, at least in this world. Nor should we try to be.

Living Well with God in All of Life

The key concept underlying all the themes I have raised in this book is this: *Hearing God's word will never make sense except when it is set within a larger life of a certain kind.*

To try to locate divine communication within human existence alienated from God is to return to idolatry, where God is there for our use. To try to solve all our life's problems by getting a word from the Lord is to hide from life and from the dignity of the role God intended us to have in creation. As John Boykin remarks, "God does not exist to solve our problems."⁹ We exist to stand up with God and count for something in his world.

We must ultimately move *beyond* the question of hearing God and into a life greater than our own—that of the kingdom of God. Our concern for discerning God’s voice must be overwhelmed by and lost in our worship and adoration of him and in our delight with his creation and his provision for our whole life. Our aim in such a life is to identify all that we are and all that we do with God’s purposes in creating us and our world. Thus, we learn how to do all things to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17). That is, we come in all things to think and act so that his goodness, greatness and beauty will be as obvious as possible—not just to ourselves, but to all those around us.

God does not exist to solve our problems. We exist to stand up with God and count for something in his world.

God’s speaking will always be an essential part of this, to the extent and in the manner God deems suitable. It will come without threat to the full participation of the redeemed self, as a unique individual, in the work of God. For those who come to this point, their life will be *theirs*—irreducibly, preciously so—and yet also God’s, and through them will flow God’s life, which is also theirs. This is the life *beyond*, and yet *inclusive of*, his guiding word. It is the life that has its beginning in the additional birth and its culmination in the everlasting, glorious society of heaven.

With this life in view, John Wesley answered an intelligent and serious man who said to him, “I hear that you preach to a great number of people every night and morning. Pray what would you do with them? Whither would you lead them? What religion do you preach? What is it good for?” Honest and searching questions, which no minister should allow out of his mind. Wesley replied,

I do preach to as many as desire to hear, every night and morning. You ask, what I would do with them: I would make them virtuous and happy, easy in themselves and useful to

others. Whither would I lead them? To heaven; to God the Judge, the lover of all, and to Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant. What religion do I preach? The religion of love; the law of kindness brought to light by the gospel. What is this good for? To make all who receive it enjoy God and themselves: to make them all like God; lovers of all; contented in their lives; and crying out at their death, in calm assurance, "O grave, where is thy victory! Thanks be unto God, who giveth me the victory, through my Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁰

While I was teaching at a pastors' conference, one pastor asked me what was the *human* issue, irrespective of church life or religion, that Jesus came to address. This is the question facing the Christian church today. My answer was this: Jesus came to respond to the universal human need to know *how to live well*. He came to show us how, through reliance on him, we can best live in the universe as it really is. That is why he said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). His supremacy lies in the greatness of the life he gives to us. Putting Jesus Christ into a worldwide competition with all known alternatives is the only way we can give our faith a chance to prove his power over the whole of life.

A Formula for Living with God's Voice

Within such a life as Wesley described to his inquisitor, God's word is to be reliably and safely sought and found—free of mystification, gimmickry, hysteria, self-righteousness, self-exaltation, self-obsession and dogmatism. Presupposing such a life, we can lay down something close to a formula for *living with* God's guiding voice.

Note, however, that it is *not* a formula for *getting God to speak to us* on matters that may concern us. Any such "formula" is ruled out by the very nature of God and of our relationship with him. This much should be clear by now. It is, instead, a formula for *living with* God's voice, for hearing his word in a life surrendered and brought to maturity by him.