

Hush!—Whispers at Willow Creek

A review of Bill Hybels' book, "The Power of a Whisper".

Bill Hybels, *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God, Having the Guts to Respond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010) 260 pages, appendixes, notes. The back cover dust jacket bears the following promo: *Learn to Hear from Heaven as You Navigate Life on Earth.*

"How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way." Psalm 119:103-104, KJV.

Sixteen years ago a psychologist noted our culture's shift to mystical spirituality, a shift which involved people hearing "a distinct 'inner voice,'" a voice that from time to time gives "the listener advice and counsel." [1] Perhaps the Christian shibboleth *The Lord told me . . .*, evidences the shift. But amazingly, what characterized the mysticism of the New Age/New Consciousness movement fifteen years ago is now emerging amongst mainstream evangelicals. In their attempt to keep in step with the culture and in the process becoming culturized (Contra Romans 12:2; 1 John 2:15-17.), the phenomenon of hearing God speak in a personal way has become quite chic in pan-evangelical Christendom. [2]

Paul Young, author of the bestselling religious allegory *The Shack*, accounts for the book's origin due to conversations he had with God. [3] On his daily work-commute from Gresham to Portland, Oregon, *World* magazine reported that, "Young used 80 minutes each day . . . to fill yellow legal pads with imagined conversations with God focused on suffering, pain, and evil." [4] A friend of Young's testified that the conversations were authentic. [5] *The Shack* became a religious bestseller with evangelicals. Now amidst the cacophony of voices claiming to either have heard or to be hearing a divine "inner voice," add the name of Bill Hybels.

Since his boyhood, the head of the *Willow Creek Association* of pastors and churches claims God has whispered to him. In thinking how to explain the story of his ministry to a campmate with whom he had become reacquainted in his adult life, Bill Hybels asked:

How could I tell this savvy, cynical business guy that my fifty-year odyssey unfolded as it has because of a series of whispers from God? Inaudible whispers, at that. (Emphasis added, *The Power of a Whisper*, 16)

For those members and followers of his association, one might hope the *inaudible* whispers Hybels heard/hears are really from God (See Luke 6:39.). On the point of inaudible whispers, William James (1842-1910) noted that mystics often employ self-contradicting phrases—like "shoreless lake," "mute language," "whispering silence," and "dazzling obscurity"—to explain their spiritual experiences. [6] Now the oxymoron "inaudible whispers" can be added to any list of contradictory phrases used to describe mystical experiences. We turn therefore to the biblical

backdrop employed by the author to authenticate that God inaudibly whispers to people.

The Biblical Analogy

Samuel was apprenticing under the priest Eli who for forty years judged Israel (1 Samuel 1:9; 4:18). Eli's judgeship was marred by the profligate immorality of his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who might have otherwise followed in their father's priestly footsteps. But because of their scandalous behavior, God called someone else to spiritually lead Israel. He called Samuel. The historian records that on four occasions by night, "**the Lord called Samuel**" (1 Samuel 3:4, 6, 8, 10). God's call of Samuel becomes the basis upon which Hybels builds his case that God whispers to him. As God *called* Samuel, so God *whispers* to Bill.

Hybels Personal Journey

Upon the occasion of hearing his second grade teacher read the Old Testament story of Eli and Samuel and after class, Hybels relates he approached his teacher asking:

"Miss Van Soelen," I said as my throat began to choke up, "does God still speak to little boys?"

She smiled and let out a relieved sigh. Placing her two hands on my shoulders, she looked me square in the eye.

"Oh, yes, Billy," she said. "He most certainly does. And if you learn to quiet yourself and listen, he even will speak to you. I am sure of it."

I felt a swell of release as I considered for the first time in my seven years of life that perhaps Christianity was more than ancient rules, creeds and other stiff-necked ways. Maybe God really did speak. And maybe he'd speak to me. (*The Power of a Whisper*, 20-21)

After the conversation, his teacher gave him a poem containing the following rhyming refrain: *Oh! Give me Samuel's ear, / An open ear, O Lord, / Alive and quick to hear / Each whisper of Thy Word; / Like him to answer to Thy call / And to obey Thee first of all.* (*The Power of a Whisper*, 22, 37) [7] About employing God's call of Samuel to validate hearing divine whispers, there are problems, experiential, biblical and theological.

An Experiential Problem

That a seven year old boy in the late 1950s thought in terms of "ancient rules, creeds and other stiff-necked ways" strains credulity. Like Hybels, I was raised in a Christian family in "Dutch" Western Michigan, and I assure you that the farthest thing from my young mind was being liberated from "ancient" restrictions. Though 21st Century evangelicals, culturized by postmodernism (i.e., there is no such thing as truth), may balk at such "stiff-necked" ways—inferring that the "**stiff-necked**" Christians are to be compared to the Jews who rebelled against Jesus (Acts 7:51)—kids of the 1950s were not thinking like that. While contemporary evangelicals feel increasingly disconnected from Christian dogmas and creeds, and therefore in need of fresh spiritual experiences and revelations to authenticate their faith, I don't remember that being a part of the intellectual milieu of the 1950s.

Please note: The authenticity of the author's innocent conversation with his teacher over God

calling Samuel is not in question. What is doubtful is whether the interchange stimulated a seven year old boy to feel released from “ancient rules, creeds and other stiff-necked ways.” Most Christian boys in that era weren’t thinking about stuff like that, but like the rest of their peers, about bikes, bubblegum and baseball cards. But perhaps in the 1950s, Hybels was a man—or boy—ahead of the times. Yet his (or his editor’s) account of feeling relieved from “ancient rules, creeds and other stiff-necked ways” appears anachronistic. Furthermore, if since in his childhood Hybels has heard mystical whispers, why are we finally finding out about them now? Why weren’t we told about them earlier in his ministry?

Biblical Problems

God’s calling of Samuel occurred during a time when “**the word of the Lord was precious**” (1 Samuel 3:1), when God’s communications (words and visions) to the priests, including Eli, were rare. But God spoke to Samuel, perhaps when he was sleeping in a chamber “in close proximity to the ark.” [8] To avoid appearance of impropriety, the *Targum* (an Aramaic translation and paraphrase of the Old Testament) explains that “Samuel was sleeping in the court of the Levites and the voice was heard from the temple of the Lord.”[9] We should note that the verb call (Hebrew *quara*) does not mean whisper (1 Samuel 3:4, 6, 8, 10). The verb commonly means to “summon.”[10] As God called Samuel, so Eli called Samuel (Hebrew *quara*, 1 Samuel 3:16). God’s call to Samuel was real, not ethereal. If we had been there, we would have heard it. That’s the meaning of the Hebrew verb. The call was of such a sound level that Samuel thought Eli heard it. Without regard to the contents of what He was going to say to the boy, God summoned Samuel. If the contents of God’s speaking had been emphasized, then the text would have read, *The Lord called* (Hebrew *quara*) *Samuel and said* (Hebrew *’amar*) *unto him* (1 Samuel 3:5, 11).

That “**the Lord came and stood**” by Samuel when He called him, indicates that “numinous feelings are no substitute for an encounter with God.” [11] Samuel was not feeling or intuiting God’s speaking to him. The Lord spoke verbally to him. Unlike how *The Power of a Whisper* infers it to have been, God’s calling of Samuel to the prophetic ministry was audible.

Furthermore, the record indicates that after the Lord called Samuel on four consecutive nights, He did not call him again. In other words, God’s calling of Samuel was not ongoing. Though the record indicates that Samuel “**called**” God (1 Samuel 12:18), it does not indicate that after the third chapter, God called Samuel. God’s call of Samuel to the prophetic ministry was finalized in chapter 3. No further call needed to be proffered. In other words, contrary to Hybels’ assumption and experience, there’s no biblical indication that *inaudible whispers* were ongoing in Samuel’s life. So what does one do when the very Scripture employed to support a spiritual experience really doesn’t support it? Other evidence is needed.

So Hybels also alludes to the experience of Elijah to make a case that God whispers, as when the prophet fled from the threats of Jezebel, hid in a cave, survived a tornado and an earthquake, and amidst the following calm, heard God’s “**still small voice**” (1 Kings 19:12, KJV). [12] When he surrendered his life to Christ, in alluding to Elijah’s experience, Hybels confesses: “In a flash of divine insight, I heard God’s *still small voice*.” (Emphasis added, *The Power of a Whisper*, 25) Later the author confesses he’s “staked [his] entire life on following the *still small voice* of God.” (Emphasis added, *The Power of a Whisper*, 109)

In his chapter “Our Communicating God,” the author attempts to buttress his case for a whispering God by listing persons and prophets in the Bible who heard God’s voice—Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Balaam (a false prophet), David, Micaiah, Satan (who continuously slanders God and His people), Job, Isaiah, Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, Jesus (God spoke to Jesus as He might speak to anybody?), the disciples, Peter and Paul. (*The Power of a Whisper*, 39-61) Are we to think that God spoke to all these individuals via *inaudible whispers*? Even a superficial reading of the text indicates He did not.

Theological Problems

That God communicates to people via inaudible whispers introduces the thought that these whispers might not be from God. Hybels admits to this when he states:

Even though God’s whispers are rarely tangible, there are concrete steps we can take to help us discern if we’re hearing from God . . . What we are about to explore in this chapter can significantly lower the likelihood of us hearing a message that is not God’s. (*The Power of a Whisper*, 91)

Note: The author provides discernment criteria by which to determine whether or not whispers are from God, but admits that hearing whispers is a dicey deal.

Believer, are you willing to admit that whispers heard might be only the musings of your own heart? As Martin Luther observed concerning the origin of what some called God’s word, “They determine what can be God’s word, not by starting from God who speaks it, but starting from man who receives it, and then they still claim it is God’s word.” [13]

Christian, are you willing, amidst the cacophony of spiritual voices shouting out in our religious culture now-a-days, to evaluate that so-called whispers might be from an unholy spirit, or perhaps the Slanderer himself? (See 1 John 4:1) When hearing of whispers, I can only think of Isaiah’s question to Israel: “**And when they say to you, ‘Consult the mediums and the spiritists, who whisper and mutter,’ should not a people consult their God?**” (Isaiah 8:19). In his own words, in chapter 4, *How to Know When You’re Hearing from God*, the author confesses that the criteria he sets forth for discerning whispers only lowers “the likelihood of us hearing a message that is not God’s.” They do not eliminate it. Remember, there are no guarantees that whispers are from God, and not from another “source.” So if whispers are not from God, to hitchhike on the subtitle of the book, then will hearers have *the guts not to respond?*

By way of contrast, the Psalmist tells us that, “**The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes**” (Psalm 19:8). In another website article—*Who Goes There?*—problems raised by hearing extra-biblical communications from God are addressed. [14]

Are we also to assume that in building the church’s foundation, God whispered to the New Testament apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20; See Hebrews 1:1-2.)? As they call into question the *Sola Scriptura* of the Protestant Reformation and the sufficiency of the Bible,

God's written Word, claims to be hearing inaudible whispers open up a Pandora's Box of possible alternative spiritualities.

Amongst emergent evangelicals, it's common to view Scripture as "metaphor," as a description of people's experiences with God. As such, the Bible becomes the Word of God only as persons attempt to enter into experiences like those the biblical characters had. To enter into the metaphor, Hybels invokes equivalency between his and Samuel's, and to a lesser extent Elijah's, experience. But by his own discernment criteria ("Filter #2: Is It Scriptural?" *The Power of a Whisper*, 99) and as has been pointed out, the equation does not equate. Four times God summoned Samuel. He didn't whisper to Samuel in an ongoing way throughout his life. To equate that He did, goes beyond the plain account in 1 Samuel, chapter 3. That Scripture is the discernment sieve through which the idea of inaudible whispers must pass, I find the claim of whispers passing through that sieve.

Conclusion

The fact that contemporary evangelicals seek "fresh" revelations from God indicates that they no longer consider Holy Scripture to be sufficient and authoritative in matters of faith (Contra 2 Timothy 3:16.). Yet if the Bible is no longer considered sufficient, the coming of "fresh revelations" raises the following conundrum. If whispers repeat the Word of God—and there is much in Hybels' book that does—then they are *unnecessary*. If whispers contradict the Word of God, then they are *heresy*. If they add to the Word of God, then they point to Scripture's *inadequacy and insufficiency*. To this point Proverbs warns: "**Add thou not unto his [God's] words, lest he [God] reprove thee, and thou be found a liar**" (Proverbs 30:6, KJV).

Fifteen years ago the Van der Merwes observed this trend. They wrote:

By all appearances, Christians are knowingly or unknowingly dabbling in eastern mysticism and the spirit world. . . . Deeper spiritual understanding seems to be the motivation behind it all. The problem is that Christians are no longer satisfied with the literal Word of God. They are looking for experiences "beyond the sacred page". The Bread of Heaven, according to their inner "sacred feelings", has become stale and outmoded. [15]

Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues, and say, He saith. Jeremiah 23:31, KJV

ENDNOTES

[1] Elizabeth L. Hillstrom, *Testing the Spirits* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995): 15. Listening to and hearing the voice of God is a popular experience claimed by many of today's New Age/New Spiritualists. In 1965, Columbia University Professor of Medical Psychology Helen Schucman (1909-1981) began to hear an inner Voice speak to her. Over a period of seven years, the Voice dictated material to her that, with transcriptional help provided by her faculty colleague William Thetford, became *A Course in Miracles*. See Helen Schucman with

William Thetford, *A Course in Miracles*, 3 Volumes (New York, NY: The Foundation for Inner Peace, 1976). Schucman credited the Voice that dictated the Course to be that of Jesus. New Age spiritualist Barbara Marx Hubbard (1929-) also listens to someone who speaks inside her. See Warren Smith, *False Christ Coming: Does Anybody Care?* (Magalia, CA: Mountain Stream Press, 2011): 25-34. New Age guru Neale Donald Walsch also claims to have heard God speak to him. See Neale Donald Walsch, *Conversations with God: an uncommon dialog, Book 1* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995, 1996). His two subsequent volumes (Books 2 and 3) were published by Hampton Roads Publishing in Charlottesville, Virginia, 1997, 1998.

[2] See Larry DeBruyn, "Be Still: Contemplative, or Listening Prayer and Psalm 46:10," *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, online: <http://guardinghisflock.com/2010/04/09/be-still/>.

[3] Immediate to the plot of *The Shack* is a personal note that the main character, Mack, receives from Papa, or God. The note reads: "Mackenzie, It's been a while. I've missed you. I'll be back at the shack next weekend if you want to get together. —Papa" See Wm. Paul Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles, CA: Windblown Media, 2007): 16.

[4] Susan Olasky, "Commuter-driven bestseller," *World*, June 28/July 5, 2008, 49.

[5] "I know the author well—a personal friend. (Our whole house church devoured it last summer, and Paul came to our home to discuss it—WONDERFUL time!) The conversations that "Mack" has with God are real conversations that Paul Young had with God . . . and they revolutionized him, his family, and friends . . . When he was a broken mess, God began to speak to him. He wrote the story (rather than a "sermon") to give the real conversations context—because Jesus also used simple stories to engage our hearts, even by-passing our objecting brains, in order to have His message take root in our hearts, and grow." Quoting Dena Brehm, on the interactive blog, *Christian Universalism-The Beautiful Heresy: The Shack*, posted February 14, 2008 at 11:44AM, <http://christian-universalism.blogs.com/thebeautifulheresy/2008/02/the-shack.html>. Though no longer available on the blog, the writer possesses a copy of the letter.

[6] See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902): 420-421.

[7] Bill Hybels, *The Power of a Whisper: Hearing God, Having the Guts to Respond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010): 22. Hybels quotes the hymn written by James Drummond Burns (1823-54), "Hushed Was the Evening Hymn," also called "Samuel" in some hymnals, from *Church Hymns and Tunes* (London: SPCK, 1874).

[8] S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1984 reprint of 1912 edition): 42.

[9] Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986): 89.

[10] Francis Brown, *The New Brown—Driver—Briggs—Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979): 895.

[11] Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 89. The word "numinous" means "spiritually elevated." The word is used of the ecstatic state which contemplatives feel they achieve when they experience God within. Gordon compares the Lord standing by Samuel to Eliphaz when a spirit-image spoke to him and said, "**Shall mortal man be more just than God? shall a man be more pure than his maker?**" (Job 4:12-17). Neither Samuel's nor Eliphaz's experiences were inaudibly numinous. No. God really spoke to them, and had you or I have been present, we would have heard the conversation. That's why we read of the calls in the Bible!

[12] That Elijah's encounter with the Lord was not mystical, see Larry DeBruyn, "A Still Small

Voice?" *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, online: <http://guardinghisflock.com/2010/04/29/a-still-small-voice/#more-1043>.

[13] Quoted by Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994): 223. That I employ Luther's quote from his book does not mean that I embrace Bloesch's view of inspiration.

[14] See Larry DeBruyn, "Who Goes There? Encountering Voices in the Quiet of Contemplative Prayer," *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, online: <http://guardinghisflock.com/2010/11/16/who-goes-there-2/>.

[15] Travers and Jewel Van der Merwe, *Strange Fire: the Rise of Gnosticism in the Church* (Lafayette, IN: Discernment Ministries, 1995): 21. Available online: <http://discernment-ministries.org/StrangeFire.pdf>.