

Impressions Ineffable . . .

The Mysticism “Lite” of Rick Warren [1]

“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*.” 1 Corinthians 2:12-13, NASB

Before dealing with the idea that God gives “impressions,” let me confess that I am not *per se* opposed to them. Like A.J. Gordon (1836-1985), founder of Gordon College, I believe the Holy Spirit of God “may beget within us emotions too deep for expression, as when ‘The Spirit himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered’ (Rom. 8:26).” [2]

Regarding the Spirit restricting Paul and Timothy to preach in Asia and Bithynia, Wayne Grudem writes: “The Holy Spirit must . . . have communicated his direct guidance to them in some specific way, whether through words heard audibly or in the mind, or through strong *subjective impressions* of a lack of the Holy Spirit’s presence and blessing as they attempted to travel to these different areas.” [3] On the point of the Spirit’s *subjective* impression upon Paul not to go to Asia and Bithynia (Acts 16:6-7), we can note the impression became *objective* when in a vision a man appeared unto Paul **“and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us”** (Acts 16:9). A subjective impression, if indeed there was one, was confirmed by an objective word. This incident in Paul’s ministry illustrates that believers are **“taught by the Spirit”** who combines **“spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*”** (1 Corinthians 2:13, NASB).

So we Christian believers should know the Holy Spirit can speak to us. Therefore, we need to be careful (metaphorically speaking) not to throw the “spiritual baby” out with the mystical bath (By using this figure, I am not suggesting there’s any sense in which mysticism, soft or hard, cleans spirituality up. In fact, the reverse is the case.) But absent the Spirit’s authentication by the Word of Scripture, thoughts can be self-originated, and it becomes vacuous to mystically confess, *The Lord told me . . .* Well, maybe He did, or maybe He didn’t. Who knows . . . all of which leads me to address Rick Warren’s idea that God speaks to people via *impressions*. [4]

Pastor Warren, leader of the internationally influential Purpose Driven movement, recently preached a four-part series of messages on “Learning to Hear God’s Voice” at Saddleback Church, the congregation he pastors. He begins the series by stating, “One of the most basic claims of Christianity is that God speaks to people.” [5] That God has revealed Himself to humanity is basic to Christianity (**“In the beginning was the Word . . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”** (John 1:1, 14). The question is not whether God speaks—He does—but rather how He speaks/has spoken, and whether or not He continues to do so. Warren cites biblical evidence that God speaks in a medium he calls “impressions”; that He “gives us ideas. He gives us hunches. He gives us these gut feelings.” [6] To prove that God communicates in this esoteric and extra-biblical way, Pastor Rick begins and ends his series of sermons by linking to Jesus’ *Parable of the Soils* (Luke 8:4-15, part one), and by referring to the

experience of the prophet *Habakkuk* (Habakkuk 2:1-2, part four). But do the parable and the prophet actually teach that God speaks in a contemporary way to contemporary Christians?

Before addressing the issue of *impressions*, let it be said, with the exception of believing the same Gospel unto salvation, that none of our Christian experiences, dear reader, are identical. We are not Christian clones, at least not yet (1 John 3:2). For the most part, we have come from various cultures to trust the Gospel—that Jesus died for our sins and was raised from death three days after—in different ways and on different days. Though the Message of the Gospel is static—it has been fixed by God—our experience of it is not. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the application of the gospel in the aftermath of regeneration is dynamic. Nevertheless, we share common trust in the unmerited forgiveness of God that comes to us via naked faith (Ephesians 2:8-9), and that together we in our beings are the temple of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:16). We are saved by grace through faith (Acts 15:11; 1 Peter 1:5), and together are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God (Romans 8:9). To use a word current within the popular culture, this is “awesome.”

Yet in conversion’s aftermath, the Lord does not leave us to be orphans in the world. He continues to lead. As the Apostle states: “**For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God**” (Romans 8:14). Though the Holy Spirit’s leading is individual and variegated among us, His goal is the same; that all believers become like Jesus (and that one day we are destined to be) and that our lives bear witness of Him (John 15:26). By the Spirit, we are to become holy because the Lord our God is holy (1 Peter 1:16). Yet, in Pastor Warren’s sermons on “Learning to Hear God’s Voice,” one finds scant reference to the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and this in contrast to the significant attention given to His ministry in the New Testament, in the Spirit’s leading of Jesus, the apostles and the apostolic church. [7] It’s as if divine impressions can be experienced independent of the Spirit’s administration. According to Warren’s scheme, all humans have to do is work-up, in a kind of New Thought way, a positive mental attitude in order to sense God speaking to them. [8]

With this stated, we turn to two central passages Warren employs to establish that God gives impressions and to address the question, do these Scriptures really support the idea that God speaks to people by giving them impressions, something he calls “gut feelings”?

The Parable—Luke 8:4-15

Jesus told the story of the four soils in Luke 8, a parable, that Warren explains is, “all about mental attitude’ He [Jesus] says these four soils represent four mental attitudes. They’re not four kinds of people . . .” [9] Is Jesus speaking, irrespective of the persons involved, about adjusting one’s mental attitude to hear God speak to them, to give them so-called “impressions,” whatever they might be?

First, Jesus’ story does concern people, four different kinds of people. Warren’s attempt to depersonalize the soils and make them represent four different attitudes does not fit. Though people’s minds and hearts are involved, the soils nevertheless represent types of persons. In Jesus’ interpretation of the parable and its environs (that’s context), the pronouns “**they**” (7x), “**their**” (2x), and “**those**” (4x) are used. Last time I looked in a dictionary these pronouns do (they, their) and can (those) refer to people. The pronouns indicate that the content of Jesus’

speaking is not just mental, but personal.

Second, in the parable, the seed represents the Word of God. Jesus said: **“The seed is the word of God”** (Luke 8:11). Fanning remarks:

God’s word, whatever form it takes, is thus a communication from him. It is intelligible and articulate, addressed to people in human language so that they may understand and act on it . . . Human language is assumed to be a sufficient and effective means . . . of communication from God to people. **[10]**

In the Bible, *the Word* refers to *intelligible communication* from God, whether in the forms of dreams, visions, prophetic speech or written communications. *The Word-seed does not refer to unintelligible impressions*, to something like gut feelings. In the parable, the seed represents **“the Word (the *logos*) of God”** which Jesus spoke to that unbelieving generation. When Jesus refers to **“the word (*logos*) of God,”** He refers to the **“oracles (the *logia*) of God”** (Acts 7:38; Romans 3:2).

Third, Jesus spoke in parables to conceal truth (His *logos*) from unbelievers as well as to reveal truth to believers. Jesus told the disciples, **“Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand”** (Luke 8:10). About those persons referenced in Isaiah’s prophecy, Jesus said that, **“this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them”** (Matthew 13:15). Primarily, Jesus addressed His Word to minds and hearts that were closed and not open, unimpressionable and not impressionable. The spiritual paradigm set forth by Jesus for understanding His parables does not fit the idea that the seed represents mystical impressions, and the soils refer to people who have worked-up a mental attitude to receive such "seed."

Fourth, even if persons cultivate their PMA (positive mental attitude), seventy-five percent of the soils will not respond to God’s word. As Jesus intended, the parable concerns a majority persons rejecting, not accepting, the Word of God. Assuming God speaks through impressions—and for reason of the Holy Spirit’s anointing ministry in our hearts, we occasionally are possessed of intuitions that some things are wrong (1 John 2:18-27)—Jesus teaches that three quarters of individuals will reject impressions. Warren minimized this rejection when he told his audience, “Some of you today are not believers. You’re seekers. You’re checking out Christ.” **[11]** He addresses seekers despite Paul’s forthright statements that, **“there is none that seeketh after God”** (Romans 3:11), and **“the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”** (1 Corinthians 2:14). Unbelievers don’t understand spiritual things—for the sake of argument we’ll call them impressions—not because they won’t, but because they can’t. Understanding spiritual things requires the Spirit’s presence, a divine presence not in and with unbelievers (Romans 8:9). Receiving the things of God’s Spirit is not a matter of adjusting our attitude so as to be tuned in to God. The picture of Scripture is that

unbelievers do not even possess receivers, for the sake of illustration, TVs or radios. In order to be tuned in to God, people need a new nature; they need to be born from above (John 3:3, 7). Unless people are born from above they will not hear from above because they do not possess the capacity (the radio, TV, I-Phone or whatever) to do so. Jesus' parable does not support the idea that people can receive divine impressions if only they will cultivate a right attitude.

We turn to the prophet Habakkuk. Does his ministry demonstrate for us "practical steps" we need to take in order to create the contemplative state necessary to hear God speak?

The Prophet—Habakkuk 2:1

To begin, a little context—as a man zealous for God's righteousness, Habakkuk lamented the sinful condition of his nation where **"the law is ignored . . . justice is never upheld . . . the wicked surround the righteous . . . [and] justice comes out perverted"** (Habakkuk 1:4). The prophet confronted God for His seeming laissez faire attitude toward aforementioned sins of Judah. The Lord answered Habakkuk's complaint. He told the prophet He was going to judge Judah and would use the wicked Babylonians-Chaldeans to administer His wrath upon the chosen nation (Habakkuk 1:5-11). Because of her covenant breaking ways and ungodly behavior, Habakkuk did not doubt that Judah deserved divine judgment, but his second complaint arose over God's answer to his first complaint; and that was that God was going use of the Chaldeans as an instrument of His wrath. How could a just God, the prophet reasoned, use a more-wicked nation like Babylon to punish a less-wicked nation like Judah? (Habakkuk 1:12-17) To this question, the prophet stationed himself in a tower on the city wall to await God's answer to his complaint, an answer that, when it came from God, would intimidate him to the core of his being. That Habakkuk provides us with an example of how Christians ought withdraw, wait, watch, write and worship in order to prepare their hearts to receive impressions from God stretches the context, and here's why.

First, Habakkuk was a Jewish prophet, one to whom God committed His "oracles." Contrarily, we, including Pastor Warren and others waiting to receive divine impressions, are not. In comparing our experience to Habakkuk's, we're not comparing apples with apples.

Second, the *Today's English Version's* rendering of Habakkuk 2:1 ("**I will climb my watchtower.**") is not, as Warren states, "a Hebraism for, I'm going to . . . get off by myself . . . so I can hear God speak." [12] The context indicates that the prophet set himself to watch, wait and observe how God was going to respond to his second complaint in the reality of history.

Third, Warren advocates that withdrawal is the first step for "receiving an impression from the holy spirit [sic]," and this despite the fact that the Holy Spirit is not even mentioned in Habakkuk. [13] In awaiting the Lord's response, Habakkuk knew that it could include a personal rebuke of him.

Fourth, in the face of his objections to God, that He was indifferent to Judah's immorality and was going to use a more-wicked people (the Chaldeans) to judge a less-wicked people (the Jews), the prophet learned that he needed to live by "faith" ("**the just shall live by his faith,**" Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). This lesson is the most important teaching found in the entire of Holy Scripture.

So God answered prophet, not by giving him an “impression,” but by personally appearing to him like He appeared to Moses (Exodus 3:2-6; “**Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.**”) and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-6; “**Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.**”). The theophany unnerved the prophet. Habakkuk describes:

God came from Teman,
The Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens,
And the earth was full of His praise.

His brightness was like the light;
He had rays flashing from His hand,
And there His power was hidden.

When I heard, my body trembled;
My lips quivered at the voice;
Rottenness entered my bones;
And I trembled in myself,
That I might rest in the day of trouble.
When he comes up to the people,
He will invade them with his troops.
(Habakkuk 3:3-4, 16, NKJV)

Can the prophet’s experience be described as a “gut feeling,” or did God really appear to Him? Did Habakkuk receive a quaint “impression” from God, or did his experience shake him to the very core of his being? From the prophet’s description, the answer is obvious. **[14]**

Conclusion

Neither biblical passage Pastor Warren invokes supports the idea that God guides people via ethereal impressions. Such guidance, absent initiation by the Holy Spirit and confirmation through Holy Scripture, is illusory. Regarding the bounds of religious experiences, Bernard Ramm (1916-1992) wrote in his book, *The Witness of the Spirit*.

The *testimonium* [the authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit] which is personal and private is yet the work of the Spirit in the common life of the Church. According to the pneumatological doctrine of the Church, the *testimonium* is personal to the core, but not individualistic; it is private, but utterly free from the spirit of religious anarchy; it occurs unseen in the heart, but drives the Christian into the fellowship of the visible, local church. It is subjective (as all things intensely personal, vital, spiritual, and meaningful are), but because the *testimonium* is the witness of the Holy Spirit of the church, and because in a real sense it occurs within the Church, the *testimonium* does not lead to subjectivism. **[15]**

For me, the idea of guidance through “impressions . . . ideas . . . hunches [and] gut feelings” is individualistic and mystic. Rightly, Warren attempts to guard against such by instructing his congregation to submit any impression to the question, “Does It Agree with the Bible?”[16] Yet the irony of Warren's guideline is that, when investigated, the very biblical passages he claims support his proposal that God speaks to people via impressions do not teach what he says they teach; namely, that if people work-up the right attitude and withdraw, wait, watch, write and worship, God will speak to them through ideas, hunches and gut feelings. To again cite Ramm, he warned: “To isolate Scripture from the Spirit, or the Spirit from Scripture, is theologically mischievous.” [17]

ENDNOTES

[1] Bruce Demarest distinguishes between hard and soft mysticism. See Bruce Demarest, “Mysticism: Peril or Promise?” *Metamorphosis: Conversations, a Forum for Authentic Transformation*.

<http://www.metamorphosis.com/tabid/75/xmmid/445/xmid/744/xmview/2/Default.aspx>.

Like hard porn, hard mysticism, when engaged, allows persons to enter an alternative reality in which they feel their personality merging into God. Soft mysticism, according to Demarest, only “seeks [a] deepening relational union with God . . . which involves no loss of individuality or selfhood.” According to Demarest’s distinction, one might categorize Rick Warren’s concept of impressions as soft mysticism or mysticism lite.

But the question becomes, in the continuum of addictive experiences the Bible calls “lusts,” and given the seductions malevolent spirit beings (demons) can provide, who can predict when “soft mysticism” might emerge into “hard mysticism”? Who knows? So in my thinking, the safest way to avoid the temptation to engage hard mysticism is to stay clear of soft mysticism, much as avoiding hard porn necessitates a man avoid soft porn, for the lesser easily leads to the worse.

[2] A.J. Gordon, *The Ministry of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1949): 172-173. Gordon’s discussion of the Spirit’s use of words is informative for the seeking heart.

[3] Emphasis added, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994): 643.

[4] Rick Warren, *Learning to Hear God’s Voice*, a four part sermon series available in a PDF format at Pastors.com, http://www.pastors.com/groups/tools_and_resources/pages/rick-s-free-sermons.aspx. Warren employs the word “impressions” forty-three times in his four sermons.

[5] Warren, Part One, “How to Hear God Speak.”

[6] Warren, Part Two, “How God Talks to You.”

[7] Part One possesses *no* mention of the Holy Spirit; Part Two has *three*, two in the twice cited text of John 14:26, and one in the quotation of an extended testimony; Part Three contains *one* mention of the Holy Spirit’s conviction ministry; and Part Four mentions Him *three* times in the recurrent statement “impressions of the Holy Spirit.”

[8] Foundational to this mind to mind or feeling to feeling communication from God, is that as image bearers, God created us with a temporal consciousness like the eternal consciousness possessed by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Romans 11:33-34, 2 Corinthians 2:16 and Romans 8:27).

[9] Warren, Part One.

[10] Buist M. Fanning, “WORD,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. Desmond Alexander,

Brian S. Roser, Editors (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000): 849.

[11] Warren, Part One.

[12] Warren, Part Four, "Receiving Guidance from God."

[13] Ibid.

[14] For further reading on a Habakkuk text employed by the New Spiritualists to promote contemplative spirituality in evangelicalism, see Pastor Larry DeBruyn, "Let All the Earth Keep Silence," *Guarding His Flock Ministries*, <http://guardinghisflock.com/2010/05/14/let-all-the-earth-keep-silence/#more-1143>.

[15] Bernard Ramm, *The Witness of the Spirit: An Essay on the Contemporary Relevance of the Internal Witness of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959): 81.

[16] Warren, Part Three, "How to Recognize God's Voice."

[17] Bernard Ramm, *Witness of the Spirit*, 64.