

Who Goes There?

Encountering voices in contemplative prayer . . .

“We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.”

—The Apostle John, 1 John 4:6, NASB

Introduction

Through practicing the discipline of solitude and silence, contemplative spiritualists hope to hear God personally speak to them. As one nationally known personality stated on the *Be Still* DVD, “intimacy automatically breeds revelation.” [1] But if a voice speaks, there is some question regarding its identity. Therefore in the video’s same segment, “Fear of Silence,” Richard Foster offers advice about how to discern who might communicate in the stillness. He said:

Learning to distinguish the voice of God . . . from just human voices within us . . . comes in much the same way that we learn any other voice. Satan pushes and condemns. God draws and encourages. And we can know the difference. [2]

Though there could be others, Richard Foster admits to a cacophony of possible voices that might speak: first, human voices within and without (a source that could involve hearing oneself speak, in which case, contemplators would be listening to themselves); second, the voice of Satan or demons; and third, God’s voice.

Who’s Voice?

In order to determine whose voice might be speaking, Foster provides criteria. If the voice is *positive* and reaffirming, then the voice is God’s. If however the voice is *negative* and that like a bully who “pushes and condemns,” then the voice must be that of Satan. To discern whether or not the voice is human, Foster offers no advice.

So if the voice is human, one is left wondering, why go into a meditative trance to hear yourself or another human speak? After all, in the normal course of life people talk to themselves and listen to others all the time, unless contemplators feel so isolated and alone, or unless in accord with the eastern monistic worldview, meditators believe they are gods so that when they listen to their voice, they are listening to god’s!

Yet Foster is of the opinion that the voice could be God’s. He errs however, by asserting that the divine voice invariably “draws and encourages.” Scripture does not record that God exclusively speaks in that manner. Yes, God encourages. To disobedient Israel he said, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3). But God can and often has spoken negatively. Speaking for God, the prophets of Israel called the sinful nation to repentance as they warned the people of coming wrath and judgment. Of the prophets who droned on and on with their “encouraging” message even in the face of Israel’s utter moral and spiritual collapse,

the Lord said, "The prophets are prophesying falsehood in My name. I have neither sent them nor commanded them nor spoken to them; they are prophesying to you a false vision, divination, futility and the deception of their own minds" (Jeremiah 14:14). In light of God's manner of speaking through the prophets, can biblical Christians legitimately dismiss negative messages as being from Satan?

In his classic work on the subject of holiness, German theologian Adolf Köberle countered the significance of the negative criteria Foster mentions. He wrote:

The clear-cut difference between mystical piety and that of the Bible can be seen most clearly in the attitude towards prayer. All mystical prayer . . . becomes a blissful absorption into divinity, where personal consciousness ceases, like the impassible, dreamy rest of Nirvana. The experience of all Biblical suppliants stands in direct contrast to this beatific transcendence. When anyone has really encountered God Himself and not merely a higher ego or an imaginary, fantastic portrayal of God, he is roused from dreaming to watchfulness, from an impure approach to a terrified retreat, from the familiar confidence of bombastic prayers to words that express a real feeling of awe towards the One Who is so far above the suppliant himself. [3]

Köberle then cites Isaiah's response to his beatific vision and communication he had of and from the Lord as his response was: "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5). Can Isaiah's beatific experience accurately be described as one of being drawn to and encouraged by the Lord? If not, then to use Foster's expression, was Isaiah being "bullied" by Satan?

Assuming that God speaks Soul to soul today, what if Foster's paradigm for determining the supernatural communication's origin was reversed, that the *negative* voice is God's and the *positive* is Satan's? It happened that way in the Garden. God warned Adam and Eve that for disobedience to God, "you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17), but Satan reassuringly told Adam and Eve, "You surely shall not die!" (Genesis 3:4). The point is that when engaging in meditative spirituality, the contemplator or mystic can never be certain who will speak, and as a consequence, the experience can become the spawning ground for myriads of flashy ideas based solely upon, he or she "heard this or that." At the juncture of such hearing, Christians and the church will have turned aside to the hearsay of "myths" (2 Timothy 4:4).

We live in the age of the Holy Spirit and His spiritual communion and communication with the human soul. But the Spirit's communication is not always pleasant. Of the Holy Spirit Jesus predicted, "And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:8). Even the Comforter does not always comfort. Sometimes He convicts, and conviction of soul is not pleasant to experience. It upsets. We do not like to be told we are wrong. Yet without the voice of the Spirit's conviction, we would continue in sin, pursue unrighteousness and deny we are accountable to God for our behavior. So when for legitimate reasons the Spirit's conviction comes over them, will Christians be so deluded by the positivity and feel good message that saturates today's evangelical church that they will ignore the

Spirit's conviction; or worse, in a turnabout, they will assign the criticism to be the bullying voice of Satan?

None of us likes criticism. Never is it pleasant, especially if deserved. Instinctively, we become defensive. Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit is not only the Comforter of believers, He is also their critic. As we might indulge the fleshly inclinations of our hearts, the Spirit brings feelings of guilt to bear down upon us. He calls us to repent of sin and return to God's righteousness. Again, should believers rightfully assign all guilt feelings to Satan? If the message of the plethora of positivity preachers who dominate evangelicalism is to be believed, then the answer would be, "yes." Negativity is satanic. But if the Bible's standard of spirituality is believed, the answer is "no," for one mark of spirituality in the Bible is a person's sensitivity to sin (See Genesis 18:27; Job 42:5-6; Isaiah 6:5; Luke 5:8; Romans 7:14-25; etc.).

A Warning

That contemplative spiritualists engage in practices that by their own admission expose them to the influence of Satan's voice is troubling. Scripture admonishes believers, "Neither give place [i.e., an opportunity] to the devil" (Ephesians 4:27). But in his advocacy of contemplative prayer, Richard Foster admits that Satan may seize the silence as an occasion to speak. He states:

I also want to give a word of precaution. In the silent contemplation of God we are entering deeply into the spiritual realm, and there is such a thing as supernatural guidance that is not divine guidance . . . there are various orders of spiritual beings, and some of them are definitely not in cooperation with God and his way! **[4]**

How to Contemplate

In the first edition of his book *The Celebration of Discipline* (1978), Foster proposes "four forms" of meditation. **[5]** The *first* involves two activities: *one*, in yogic style, sitting for about five to ten minutes with your palms down (consciously letting go of your problems—release it) and then with your palms up (silently waiting for God's peace—receive it); or *two*, concentrating on breathing (exhaling worries, fears and concerns, inhaling God's peace).

The *second* involves meditating on some aspect of creation because if we will but listen, God as Foster quotes Agnes Sanford (1897-1982), "still speaks to us through the earth and the sea, the birds of the air and the little living creatures upon the earth . . ." **[6]**

The *third* involves meditation for an extended period of time on a particular Scripture during which time the contemplator can "actually encounter the living Christ . . . be addressed by His voice and be touched by His healing power." **[7]** In contrast to imagination that might happen during meditation, Foster writes that with Jesus "it can be a genuine confrontation" and then adds, "Jesus Christ may actually come to you." **[8]** Meditators can, it appears, stimulate their own personal and private *Parousia*, Presence or Second Coming (Matthew 24:30), and this despite the fact that Scripture declares the event will be public (Revelation 1:7).

But Foster describes yet a *fourth* type of meditation, one he calls "the Mt. Everest of the soul," one that "has its objective to bring you into a deep inner communion with the Father where you

look at Him and He looks at you.” [9] And this can happen despite Jesus’ testimony that He alone had visage of the Father; He said, “Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father”; and despite the Apostle John’s statement, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (John 6:46; 1:18; Compare 1 Timothy 6:16.). But go for it anyway.

Going OBE (Out of the Body)

As contemplators climb smaller meditative peaks, and meditatively gaze at the sky above, they may sense a desire to go higher. [10] Foster describes an exercise of meditation that can induce and transport the contemplator’s soul to experience another dimension of reality. “After awhile” wrote Foster, “there is a deep yearning within to go into the upper regions beyond the clouds.” [11] So to climb the highest peak, Foster tells readers,

In your imagination allow your spiritual body, shining with light, to rise out of your physical body. Look back so that you can see yourself lying in the grass and reassure your body that you will return momentarily. Imagine your spiritual self, alive and vibrant, rising up through the clouds and into the stratosphere. Observe your physical body, the knoll, and the forest shrink as you leave the earth. Go deeper and deeper into outer space until there is nothing except the warm presence of the eternal Creator. Rest in His presence. Listen quietly, anticipating the unanticipated. Note carefully any instruction given. With time and experience you will be able to distinguish readily between mere human thought that may bubble up to the conscious mind and the True Spirit which moves upon the heart. Do not be surprised if the instruction is terribly practical and not pointed if no words come; like good friends, you are silently enjoying the company of each other. When it is time for you to leave, audibly thank the Lord for His goodness and return to the meadow. Walk joyfully back along the path until you return home full of new life and energy. [12]

Question: In light Scripture’s admonition to “resist the devil” (James 4:7), why should Christians flirt with a spiritual practice that might expose them to hear Satan or a demon speak?

Conclusion

The fact that contemporary evangelicals seek “fresh” revelations from and experiences with God, even to go “out of the body,” indicates that they no longer consider Holy Scripture to be sufficient and authoritative in matters of faith and its practice (Contra 2 Timothy 3:16.). Yet if the Bible is no longer considered sufficient, hearing another voice give a revelation raises the following conundrum:

If a voice repeats what’s in Holy Scripture, then the word is *unnecessary*. If a voice intuition or actual speaking contradicts the Word of God, then what it says is *heresy*. If however, the voice supplements the Word of God, then the fresh revelation points to Scripture’s *insufficiency*, and regarding this last 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).

So the Apostle Paul warned the Colossians against the folk religion that was leading them astray from the faith:

“Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God” (Emphasis added, Colossians 2:18-19).

One of the marks of spiritual defrauders is, as Paul points out, that they take their “stand on *visions they have seen.*” Would it not also be a legitimate application of Paul’s words to think that spiritual defrauders might also take their stand upon *voices they have heard?*

Endnotes

- [1] Michelle McKinney Hammond, “Fear of Silence,” *Be Still* (DVD © 2006 Twentieth Fox Home Entertainment LLC).
- [2] Ibid: Richard Foster segment.
- [3] Italics mine, Adolf Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, John C. Mattes, Translator (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1938): 35-36.
- [4] Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1992): 157.
- [5] Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978): 27-28. In the book’s 10th Anniversary revision, Foster still advises the same formats for meditation, but eliminates much of the advice and goals of meditation evident in the first edition. See Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Revised Edition (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988): 29-32. *Christianity Today*, the magazine of evangelicalism, has called the book, having sold over a million copies, one of the top ten books of the twentieth century. This raises the question, How many copies of the 1978 edition are still in circulation as used books? If they are still circulating, then the issues raised deserve continuing address for the mystical path Foster promotes is even today being followed and experienced.
- [6] Ibid: 25. During the 60s thru the 80s, Sanford was a charismatic leader of the Inner Healing Movement.
- [7] Ibid: 26.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Ibid: 27.
- [10] As they climb the “mystic mountain,” contemplators may at hear and experience “attendant voices and visitations.” See Ray C. Petry, Editor, *Late Medieval Mysticism: The Library of Christian Classics*, Volume 17 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1957): 21. Other experiences may include body illumination and levitation. Other experienced paranormal phenomena (PSI) can include clairvoyance, clairaudience, precognition, prophecy and so on. See Herbert Thurston, S.J., *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, J.H. Crehan, Editor (Fort Collins, CO: Roman Catholic Books, 1951); Montague Summers, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism: With Especial Reference to the Stigmata, Divine and Diabolic*

(London, GB: Rider & Company, 1950); and Raynor C. Johnson, *The Imprisoned Splendor: An approach to Reality, based upon the significance of data drawn from the fields of Natural Science, Psychical Research and Mystical Experience* (Cambridge, GB: University Press, 1989).

[11] Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (1978), 27.

[12] Ibid: Emphasis added. In a bibliographical note regarding the first edition of Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* (1978), Christian philosopher Arthur Johnson stated: "In an attempt to provide advice on living the Christian life, Foster promotes a very mystical view of Christianity." Therefore Johnson concluded that, "Much of what the Protestant Reformers opposed is promoted by Foster." See Arthur L. Johnson, *Faith Misguided: Exposing the Dangers of Mysticism* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1988): 153.