

WORD AND SPIRIT

The God Who Talks Out Loud

On Hearing from God When You Hear Nothing

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
Free for congregational use · larryherzogjr.com

The complaint nobody makes out loud

There is a particular kind of Christian misery that almost never gets said in a small group, because saying it sounds like a confession of unbelief.

It goes like this: *Everyone around me talks about what God told them. God told them to take the job. God told them the house was the right one. God gave someone a word for someone else, and they wept, and it was beautiful. I have been praying for eleven years and I have never once heard anything I could honestly call a voice. I have had thoughts. I have had strong feelings. I have had moods that came and went with sleep and caffeine. But nothing has ever said anything to me. So either the whole thing is theater, or there is something wrong with me.*

That is not a crisis of intellect. It is a wound, and it was inflicted by teaching.

The teaching is everywhere, and it is remarkably consistent wherever it appears. It says that hearing from God is normal Christian equipment. It says that if you are not hearing, something is blocking the signal — unconfessed sin, distraction, impatience, insufficient quiet time, an unsundered agenda. It offers a checklist for clearing the line. And then, having promised you a voice, it hands you the bill: if the spirit at work in you is not God's, then it belongs to the enemy. If hearing from God is what separates a believer from an unbeliever, and you have heard nothing, you now have two available conclusions about yourself, and neither of them is *baptized child of God who has not had an unusual experience*.

This essay is about why that teaching is wrong, why it is cruel, and what God has actually done about the problem of divine silence — which is a great deal more than a whisper.

The name for it

Lutherans have an old word for locating God's speech inside the human being: *enthusiasm*. Not enthusiasm in the modern sense of zeal, but *Schwärmerei*, the conviction that the Spirit comes to a person directly, apart from and prior to the external Word.

Luther treated it as the root error, not a peripheral one. In the Smalcald Articles he insists that in everything having to do with the spoken, external Word, God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from that external Word, which comes first (SA III.VIII, Kolb-Wengert). He said it because he had watched men claim the Spirit against the Word and then do whatever they liked with a clear conscience. He also said, with characteristic bluntness, that the enthusiasts had swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all.

The Augsburg Confession makes the same point positively. God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments, and through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who produces faith where and when he wills in those who hear the gospel (AC V). The article then rejects those who imagine the Spirit comes to people without the external Word, through their own preparation and works.

Notice what that article does *not* say. It does not say the Spirit is weak, or distant, or stingy. It says the opposite: the Spirit is so committed to actually reaching you that he refuses to depend on your inner life to do it. He attached himself to water, to words spoken out loud by a man with a voice, to bread and the cup. He went external on purpose.

Modern inner-voice teaching is enthusiasm with the sixteenth-century vocabulary sanded off. It does not usually deny the Bible. It typically insists, in fact, that God's voice will never contradict Scripture. But look closely at how that rule functions: Scripture becomes the *filter*, and the inner impression remains the *message*. The Bible is demoted from the mouth of God to the quality-control department. That is a subtle move, and it is the whole ballgame.

The double bind

Set the two claims side by side, because they are almost always taught together.

Claim one: Every true believer hears from God in one way or another.

Claim two: If the spirit at work in you is not of God, it is of the enemy.

A person who hears nothing is now trapped. Claim one has ruled out the possibility of being an ordinary Christian who simply has not had an experience. Claim two has ruled out the possibility that the silence is neutral. The teaching has constructed a room with no door for the very person most likely to be sitting in it: the quiet, faithful, doubting believer who shows up every Sunday and has never had a supernatural impression in her life.

And it gets worse when the checklist arrives. Fear, doubt, impatience, unconfessed sin, a personal agenda — these are given as the reasons the line is dead. Every item on that list is a permanent feature of the Christian in this life. Simultaneously righteous and sinner is not a phase you exit; it is a diagnosis that holds until you are in the ground. So the checklist can never be completed, and its incompleteness always points back at you. Silence becomes evidence of your failure to surrender. The remedy for the silence is more of the effort that produced the silence.

This is the anxious bench with better production values. My book on the altar call argues that decision theology relocates assurance from Christ's work to the believer's experience of it. Inner-voice teaching does exactly the same thing and does not even require an altar. It simply moves the bench inside your skull, where you can sit on it at three in the morning.

The texts, read whole

The teaching leans on a small set of passages, and every one of them says something different in context — usually the opposite thing.

Isaiah 30:21. The famous line about hearing a word behind you saying *this is the way, walk in it*. Back up one verse. The Lord gives his people the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, and then their teachers will no longer be hidden; their eyes will see their teachers, and *then* they will hear the word behind them. The promise is not a private nudge at a fork in the road. It is the restoration of visible, audible, public instruction after a period of judgment in which it had been withdrawn. And read the next verse: the immediate result is that they throw out their idols. This is a text about God restoring preaching to a people who had lost it — which makes it, if anything, an argument for the pulpit.

Romans 8:14. *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God.* Being “led” here is universally read as being steered toward decisions. But Paul defines his own term one verse earlier: if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. Being led by the Spirit is the mortification of the flesh. It is a description of what the Spirit does to sin in a Christian, not a description of receiving directions. And Paul’s payoff two verses later is not guidance at all; it is assurance. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children, and he does it by putting a word in our mouths — *Abba, Father* — which is language, learned, taught, external, the same word Jesus used and the church has prayed ever since. Galatians 4:6 says the same thing. The Spirit’s characteristic speech is not information delivered to you; it is prayer created in you.

1 Corinthians 2:9-12. The Spirit searches the deep things of God and reveals them to us. Read one more verse. Paul says *we speak* these things, in words taught by the Spirit. The “us” to whom the deep things are revealed is apostolic, and the revelation’s destination is preaching. Paul is defending the content of his proclamation — Christ crucified, which he has just spent a chapter insisting on — against people who wanted something more impressive. Using this passage to authorize private impressions inverts it. It is a text about the public word, cited as a text about the inner one.

John 10:27. *My sheep listen to my voice.* Throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus’ voice is his word, spoken and heard — and in this same chapter it is the voice that calls the sheep out and eventually calls a dead man out of a tomb by name. Then comes the actual point of the passage, which nobody quotes: he gives them eternal life, they will never perish, and no one can snatch them out of his hand or the Father’s. The paragraph is about the shepherd’s grip, not the sheep’s auditory acuity. It was never meant to be a hearing test.

Joshua 1:8. Adduced as a proof of meditation that fills the mind with truth — and it does exactly that, which is why it is such an odd choice for the inner-voice case. What Joshua is told to meditate on is *the book*. A physical scroll, with words in it that other people wrote down, which he is to keep on his lips day and night. The verse is a monument to the external Word.

Galatians 5:17. The flesh against the Spirit. Quoted to establish that your conscience is God speaking to you at the moment of decision. But Paul's point is that the Christian is a battlefield, so that you cannot simply do what you want. If anything, the verse warns you that your inner life is contested territory and a poor place to look for a clear signal.

Six texts, and not one of them promises what it is being used to promise.

Your conscience is not a telephone

One claim in this teaching deserves separate treatment, because it is the one that does the most damage in private.

The claim is that your conscience is God speaking to you in the moment between two choices, so that following it is righteousness and refusing it is sin.

Conscience is real, it is God-given, and it is not revelation. It is a faculty that accuses and excuses on the basis of what it has been taught. It can be well-formed or badly formed. It convicts the scrupulous man of things that are not sins and leaves the hardened man untroubled by things that are. Paul knows this and says so: he is aware of nothing against himself, but that does not acquit him — the Lord is the one who judges him. A clean conscience is not a verdict, and a tormented one is not a sentence.

Treating conscience as the live voice of God has a specific and predictable consequence. The person whose conscience is loudest is usually the person whose conscience is least reliable. The tender, anxious, over-scrupulous believer — the one who cannot stop replaying her sins — is precisely the person this teaching arms with divine authority against herself. Her self-accusation now carries the signature of God. There is no appeal, because the prosecutor and the judge have been merged.

The gospel does the opposite. It puts a word *over against* the conscience, spoken by someone else, that the conscience did not generate and cannot revoke. That is what absolution is for. When a called man says *I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, he is not describing a feeling you should try to have. He is delivering a verdict from outside the courtroom of your head, and Jesus staked his own authority on it: whoever listens to you listens to me. That word does not need your conscience to countersign it.

What God has actually said, and where he says it

Here is the part that gets lost in the argument, and it is the only part that finally matters.

God is not silent. He has never been the strong, quiet type. Hebrews opens by saying that God spoke long ago in many portions and many ways through the prophets, and in these last days he has spoken to us in a Son. The word is *spoken*. The whole Christian claim is that God is a talker, that he made the world by speaking and saves it the same way.

And he has told us where he does his talking.

In preaching. Paul asks how people can call on someone they have not believed in, and believe in someone they have not heard of, and hear without a preacher — and concludes that faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word about Christ. Not through the ear alone; through a *voice*. God appointed men to stand up in front of other men and say things out loud on his behalf. The sermon is not a lecture about God's word. It is God's word. When the preacher proclaims Christ crucified for you, God is at that moment speaking to you audibly, in a language you know, at a volume you can hear.

In baptism. He said your name. He attached his own true name to a specific, dated, witnessed event involving actual water and your actual head. Whatever else is unclear about your standing, that happened, and it happened outside you, and no mood can undo it. Luther's counsel to the man drowning in doubt was not *listen harder*. It was: I am baptized.

In absolution. The forgiveness of sins spoken by one Christian to another, and especially by the man called to speak it, is God's own act. Our Confessions treat it as no less a sacrament than the others in what it delivers (Ap XIII), and Luther lists the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters among the ways the gospel comes to us (SA III.IV). This is God speaking through a human larynx in your direction, by name, about your specific sin.

In the Supper. The two most personal words in Scripture are attached to a piece of bread and a cup: *for you*. Not for the worthy, not for the sensitive, not for those who have cleared the checklist. For you. The Large Catechism observes that these words require nothing but hearts that believe them.

Every one of these is louder, more definite, and more checkable than any impression you will ever have at four in the morning. And every one of them has a property your inner voice does not: it can be *doubted and still be true*. A feeling that you doubt is destroyed. A word spoken over you by God stands there whether or not you are currently able to feel it. That is not a consolation prize for people with weak spiritual antennae. It is the entire architecture of Christian assurance, and it was built this way on purpose, for us, because he knew what our hearts were like.

But what about the job offer?

Fair question, and it deserves better than a dismissal.

Christians face decisions that Scripture does not address by name. Which house. Which career. Whether to move your family. Which of two good men to marry. If God is not going to whisper, how are you supposed to decide?

The honest answer is that Scripture gives you something less thrilling and far more usable than a whisper. It gives you a station in life, a neighbor in front of you, a working mind, wise counselors, a moral law that rules out a great deal, and enormous freedom in everything that remains. This is what the doctrine of vocation is for. The question is not *what is God's secret preference for my life*, which he has not published and which you would

misread anyway. The question is *which of these lawful options best serves the people God has actually placed in front of me* — and that question you can answer with prayer, counsel, and a legal pad.

The secret things belong to the Lord; the things revealed belong to us and to our children, so that we may do them. God's hidden governance of your life is real, comprehensive, and none of your business in advance. You will read it backward, if at all, and even then with caution. The theology of glory wants providence in real time, as a running commentary. The theology of the cross lets God be hidden in his working and clings to the word he has actually said.

And when you choose badly — as you will, more than once — the inner-voice framework has nothing for you but the suspicion that you failed to listen. The doctrine of vocation has forgiveness and a next morning.

Does God still act providentially through circumstances, through the counsel of a friend, through a passage that lands on a hard day? Of course. He is not confined. But there is a world of difference between *God governs all things* and *God is issuing me instructions I am responsible for decoding correctly*. The first is comfort. The second is a job you cannot do, with a performance review you cannot pass. Test everything against the Word; hold to what is good; and never, under any circumstances, let an impression establish doctrine or determine your standing with God. Peter, who had heard the voice from the cloud on the mountain with his own ears, told his readers that they had something more reliable than that: the prophetic word. If the man who heard the audible voice of God pointed away from his experience and toward the text, we are in no position to reverse the arrow.

What the Spirit is actually doing while you hear nothing

The last thing to say is the most important, and it is the thing this teaching most obscures.

The Spirit's work is not primarily informational. Scripture describes him convicting the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment; creating faith through the gospel; glorifying Christ by taking what is his and declaring it; producing love, joy, peace, patience over years and decades; and interceding for us with groanings too deep for words when we do not even know what to pray for.

Read that last one again. The Spirit's most intimate described activity in the believer is *inarticulate*. It does not come with a transcript. Paul's picture of the Spirit at his closest to you is a Christian who does not know what to say, praying badly, being carried anyway.

So consider what has actually been happening during your years of silence. You have kept believing something the world calls foolish. You have repented of sins nobody made you repent of. You have shown up. You have gone back to the rail. You have loved people who did not earn it. You have not been able to shake this. None of that is the residue of a personality type. Every bit of it is the Spirit's work in you, done in exactly the manner Scripture says he does it — quietly, through the Word, without a light show.

You have been hearing from God the entire time. It just never sounded like your own thoughts, because it wasn't.

To the person who hears nothing

If you have read this far because the silence is yours, take this and leave the rest.

You have not failed a test. There is no test. The absence of an inner voice is not evidence of an absent Spirit, an unregenerate heart, or a demonic substitute. It is evidence that you are an ordinary Christian, which is the only kind there is.

God has spoken to you, out loud, by name, in public, with witnesses. He said your name over water. He says *I forgive you* through a man he called and sent. He says *for you* every time you kneel. He says *Christ died for sinners* every Sunday from a pulpit, and you are in the room.

That word is not quieter than the voice you were promised. It is the only one loud enough to be heard over yourself.

Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible® copyright ©1996, 2019 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. All rights reserved. Quoted by permission.