

DALLAS
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FOREWORD BY JAMES BRYAN SMITH

HEARING
GOD

Developing a Conversational Relationship with God



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A Paradox About Hearing God

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it; yet I do not advise you to do it from that motive.

It is not pleasure which we ought to seek in this exercise; but let us do it from a principle of love, and because God would have us.

Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*



Sunday dinner was finished, but we lingered around the table, savoring the good food and reflecting on the morning’s service at church. The congregation—where I then served as a very young (and very green) assistant pastor—was excited about its plans for a new sanctuary to replace its old building, which was much loved but long overused and outgrown.

The morning message had focused on the plans for the new building. Our pastor spoke of his vision for the church’s increased ministry. He indicated how strongly he felt God’s guidance in the way the congregation was going, and he testified that God had *spoken* to him about things that should be done.

My wife’s grandmother, Mrs. Lucy Latimer (“Mema” to us all),

seemed deep in thought as we continued to chatter along. Finally, she said quietly, “I wonder why God never speaks to me like that.”

This simple comment, which came like a bolt out of the blue from the heart of this woman of unshakable faith and complete devotion, forever changed my attitude toward glib talk about God’s speaking to us or about divine guidance. Through her words—in a way I came to understand only later—God spoke to me.

I was given a vivid realization, which has never left me, of how such talk places many sincere Christians on the outside, looking in. They are not necessarily lacking the experience of hearing God, but they do not understand the language or how their experience works. This leaves them feeling confused and deficient, and may lead them to play a game that they do not really understand and that rightly makes them very uncomfortable. It undermines their confidence that they are fully acceptable to God.

Mema, in fact, had a richly interactive life with God, as we all knew. But for whatever reasons, she had not been able to relate her experience of God’s presence in her life—of which she was completely certain—to the idea of God’s speaking with her. This left her at a loss for how to deal with the *conversational* side of her friendship with God.

Up to that point I had rashly assumed that if you were really a Christian, then God spoke to you as a matter of course and you knew it. I was sure that he spoke individually and specifically about what he wanted each believer to do and that he also taught and made real to individuals the general truths all must believe in order to enter into life with him.

The Moving of God

Later I came to realize that my confidence was not based on genuine understanding. It came from my experiences in a series of revival meetings in which I was immersed as a young man. During those meetings I became accustomed to interacting with a charac-

teristic type of thought and impulse, which was to me God moving on my mind and heart. This experience was clearly marked out for me and it guided my actions, though I held no theory or doctrine about it.

Then as I subsequently grew into the ministry, I learned to wait upon “the word of God” to come to me. In the most primary of senses the word of God is simply *God’s speaking*. I also learned to expect his speaking to come through me to others. Experience taught me the remarkable difference between when it was “just me” talking, or even “just me” quoting and discussing Scripture, and when a certain something more was taking place.

Through their writings, great Christians of the past such as John Calvin and William Law offered what we might call “the ministry of Eli” to me (see 1 Sam 3:8-

9).¹ They gave me further insight into what was happening in my experiences and why it was happening.

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They helped me to identify and respond to experiences of God’s speaking, just as Eli helped Samuel in the biblical story.

They also assured me that the same Spirit who delivered the Scriptures to holy men of old speaks today in the hearts of those who gather around the written Word to minister and be ministered to. And they warned me that *only if* this happened could I avoid being just another more or less clever letter-learned scribe—trying to nourish the souls of my hearers out of the contents of my own brain, giving them only what *I* was able to work up through my own efforts from the Bible or elsewhere.

It was not easy, however, for me to see that our most sacred experiences often blind us. The light that makes it possible for us to see may also dazzle our eyes to the clearest of realities and make it impossible for us to see what lies in a shadow. Caught up in my own experiences of the workings of God’s voice, I did not

really understand it at all. I only knew its reality, and I thoughtlessly assumed it was a functioning, intelligible fact in every believer's life. Obviously, I had a lot to learn.

So for a long while I was unable to appreciate the huge problems that the idea of God's speaking to us created for some of the most faithful adherents of the church—not to mention those entirely outside it. When someone seemed to have difficulty with hearing God, I simply passed it off as a sign of weakness of faith or even rebellion on their part. Yet I could not entirely avoid being aware that many faithful, devout Christians can make no sense of being guided by God—except perhaps as it comes in the form of outright necessities imposed by force of circumstances.

I saw them driven to turn all guidance into blind force—rigidly controlling guidance—and to treat God's will as nothing but fate. And I was distressed at how often people identified some brutal event as God's will—even when it clearly came from a decision made by human beings. They then easily moved on to the faith-destroying, even blasphemous idea that everything that happens in this world is caused by God.

The Ongoing Conversation

Today I continue to believe that people are meant to live in an ongoing conversation with God, speaking and being spoken to. I believe that this can be abundantly verified in experience when rightly understood. God's visits to Adam and Eve in the Garden, Enoch's walks with God and the face-to-face conversations between Moses and Jehovah are all commonly regarded as highly exceptional moments in the religious history of humankind. Aside from their obviously unique historical role, however, they are not meant to be exceptional at all. Rather, they are examples of the normal human life God intended for us: God's indwelling his people through personal presence and fellowship. Given our basic nature, we live—really live—only through God's regular speaking in our souls and thus

“by every word that comes from of the mouth of God.”

During the time I spent writing this book, I made a special point of drawing others out in conversation concerning their experiences of hearing God. When they sensed a spirit of acceptance and understood the topic is to be dealt with seriously, then their stories began to flow. And as understanding and confidence grew, other cases came to mind that they saw to be or to contain a word from God to the individual. Many might be surprised to discover what a high percentage of serious Christians—and even non-Christians—can tell of specific experiences in which they are sure God spoke to them.

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Of course, talking *to* God is an almost universal practice. The words “Talking to God: An Intimate Look at the Way We Pray” covered the front of *Newsweek’s* issue for January 6, 1992. The main article was devoted to some sociological studies of the practice of prayer undertaken in the United States. “This week,” the article said, “more of us will pray than will go to work, or exercise, or have sexual relations. . . . 78 percent of all Americans pray at least once a week; more than half (57 percent) report praying at least once a day. . . . Even among the 13 percent of Americans who are atheists or agnostics, nearly one in five still prays daily.”

As these studies also found, it is widely recognized that a major part of prayer is listening to God and letting God direct us. But those who experience a directing word from God rarely speak about it. Often they have never spoken of it at all, even to their closest friends.

The UFO Syndrome

Is it not with good reason that we hesitate to speak about experi-

ences we regard as God's speaking to us? Similarly, those who think they have sighted a UFO or those who have had the much discussed near-death experiences soon learn to keep their mouths shut. They know that they may single themselves out for unwanted attention if they are not very careful.

Perhaps they will be regarded as eccentric or even crazy. And since those experiences are strange and hard to interpret, these people genuinely fear being misguided. They do not wish to go public with something that might be a mistake on their part. They also fear being thought of as arrogant, as taking themselves to be special or, to borrow language the apostle Paul used about his own experiences, as being "too elated by the abundance of revelations" (2 Cor 12:7 RSV).

Similar doubts and hesitations justifiably trouble those who feel they are spoken to by God. "Why is it," comedian Lily Tomlin asks, "that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?" Such a response from ourselves or others to someone's claim to have heard from God is especially likely today because of the lack of specific teaching and pastoral guidance on such matters. Indeed, like the Sadducees of old, many church leaders discourage the idea that God *would* speak to the individual. And some leaders obviously prefer that God speak only to them and not to their flock. After all, it is well known that people go off into all sorts of errors and become quite unmanageable once God starts "talking" to them.

Our Leaders Hear from God

Faced with such inner fears and lack of teaching or even with explicit denial or discouragement, disciples of Christ today may be somewhat encouraged by another message that emanates from their fellowships. For we are also constantly confronted with suggestions or implications that ideally we *should* be engaged in com-

munications with God, just like our leaders.

Certainly our Christian leaders commonly indicate that God has spoken to them. And precisely because they are our leaders, there is a strong suggestion that we should strive to be like them. Here are a few random cases.

In a television interview Dr. Ken Taylor, who produced the widely used version of the Scriptures known as the Living Bible and the New Living Translation, told how he had been concerned about children having a Bible they could easily understand. According to his statement, one afternoon “God revealed” to him “the idea of a thought-for-thought translation instead of word-for-word.” This idea worked so well that such versions have now been published in many languages around the world and newer paraphrases abound.

Often it is in times of great inward distress that we hear the voice of God directed specifically to us. In the 1640s George Fox, founder of the Friends or Quaker movement, wandered the fields and byways of the English countryside, seeking someone who could show him the way to peace with God. He finally became convinced that

there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do; then, oh! then I heard a voice which said, “there is one, even Jesus Christ, that can speak to thy condition”; and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory.²

In book eight of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) tells how in a similarly distraught condition he “heard from a neighboring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft

repeating, “Take up and read. Take up and read.” He could remember no child’s game with these words. “So, checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God, to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find.” Thus he came upon Romans 13:13-14. His condition was immediately transformed, as was Fox’s centuries later, and one of the greatest and most influential of all Christians entered the kingdom of the heavens.

Quite characteristically, a weekly publication from a large local church states that the pastor “has been given a bold vision by our Lord.” The vision is that every person in the entire geographical area where the church is located should be called to Christ in a one-year period by a telephone call from some person in the church. Notice this is not described as a bright idea that struck the pastor, but as a vision communicated to him by God. And of course that makes all the difference in the world in its meaning for the congregation that the pastor leads.

I cite these cases here not because they are exceptional but precisely because they are so common. There is a practically endless supply of such stories. They vary in detail from one denominational tradition to another, but they are present in all Christian communions to some significant degree, except those that have moved beyond theological liberalism into simple humanism.

Should we expect anything else, given the words of the scriptural record and the heritage of the Christian church? As Christians we stand in a millennia-long tradition of humans who have been addressed by God. The ancient Israelites heard the voice of their God speaking to them out of the midst of fire (Deut 4:33). A regular place of communion and conversational interchange between the high priest and God was established in the mercy seat over the ark of God (Ex 25:22; see also Lk 1:11-21).

But the *individual person* with faith among the Israelites also cried out expectantly to be taught by God:

Teach me to do your will,
 for you are my God.
 Let your good spirit lead me
 on a level path. (Ps 143:10)

Israel's experience led the prophet Isaiah—who also had firsthand experience of conversing with God (Is 6)—to describe conditions of the faithful this way:

Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
 you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. . . .
 The LORD will guide you continually. (Is 58:9, 11)

Abiding Includes Conversing

On the evening before his crucifixion, Jesus assured his little band of followers that although he was leaving them, he would continue to manifest himself to all who loved him. Judas who was also called Thaddaeus then asked just the right question: *How would this manifesting take place?* Jesus' reply was that he and his Father would "come to them and make our home with them" (Jn 14:22-23).

Certainly this abiding of the Son and the Father in the faithful heart involves conscious communication or conversation in a manner and a measure our Lord himself considers to be appropriate. It is simply beyond belief that two persons so intimately related as indicated in Jesus' answer to Thaddaeus would not speak explicitly to one another. The Spirit who inhabits us is not mute, restricting himself to an occasional nudge, a hot flash, a brilliant image or a case of goose bumps.

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Such simple reasonings add further weight to the examples set by

well-known Christians that confirm the thought that ideally we should be engaged in personal communion with God. We might well ask, “How could there be a personal relationship, a personal walk with God—or with anyone else—*without* individualized communication?”

Sometimes today it seems that our personal relationship with God is treated as no more than a mere arrangement or understanding that Jesus and his Father have about us. Our personal relationship then only means that each believer has his or her own unique account in heaven, which allows them to draw on the merits of Christ to pay their sin bills. Or possibly it means that God’s general providence for his creation is adequate to provide for each person.

But who does not think there should be much more to a personal relationship than that? A mere benefactor, however powerful, kind and thoughtful, is not the same thing as a *friend*. Jesus says, “I have called you friends” (Jn 15:15) and “Look, I am with you every minute, even to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20, paraphrase; cf. Heb 13:5-6).

One-to-One with God

God walks and talks in our midst as part of how the kingdom of God is in our midst (Lk 17:21). Our relationship with God is not a consumerist relationship; nor do Christians understand their faith to be a consumer religion. We don’t consume the merits of Christ or the services of the church. We are participants, not spectators. Accordingly, we seek to interact with God in a relationship of listening and speaking. Notice the interaction: “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, *seek my face* and turn from their wicked ways, then *I will hear* from heaven, will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron 7:14, emphasis added). If we humble ourselves and seek God, he will respond. Such interaction is part of our friendship with God.

In the last analysis, nothing is more central to the practical life of the Christian than confidence in God's individual dealings with each person. The individual care of the shepherd for his sheep, of the parent for the child and of the lover for the beloved are all biblical images that have passed into the consciousness of Western humanity. They pervasively and essentially mark our art and general culture as well as our religion. Not only conservative and liberal Christians, high-church and Pentecostal, but also Christian and Jew, and even Jew and Muslim, come together in saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack for nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters" (Ps 23:1-2, paraphrase).

The biblical record always presents the relationship between God and the believer as more like a friendship or family tie than merely one person's arranging to take care of the needs of another. If we consider that startling array of biblical personalities from Adam to the apostles Paul and John, we behold the millennia-long saga of God's invading human personality and history on a one-to-one basis. There is nothing general or secondhand about the divine encounters with Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Nehemiah, Mary or Peter.

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The saga continues up to our own day in the lives of those recognized as leaders in the spiritual life. When we consider, coming through the ages, St. Augustine, Teresa of Ávila, St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, George Fox, John Wesley, C. H. Spurgeon, Phoebe Palmer, D. L. Moody, Frank Laubach, A. W. Tozer or Henri Nouwen, we see in each case a person who regards personal communion *and* communication with God both as life-changing episodes and as daily bread. These are people who seek to focus their minds on God, to pray moment by moment. Untold thousands of

humble Christians whose names will never appear in print—who will never preach a sermon or teach a class—can testify equally well to the same kinds of encounters with God as are manifested by the great ones in the Way.

Robert C. McFarlane was a well-known businessman in the Los Angeles area. He had moved to California from Oklahoma in 1970, and within just a few days of his arrival—due to a disastrous misunderstanding with a close friend—he had to take control of an insurance agency. He did not want it, but he had to make it succeed in order to save the large amount of money he had invested in it.

By the spring of 1973 he was in the third year of constant strain and stress in the operation of the business. He had recently been converted through the influence of the Rolling Hills Covenant Church in Southern California, and in answer to the prayers of his wife, Betty, and her many Christian friends.

One day that spring the continual danger of defeat, the daylight and dark hours of effort, the frustration at every turn and the hardened memories of the cause of his financial difficulties came upon him with special force. Robert drove toward his office, facing yet another day of futility and failure but having to accomplish the absolute necessities to keep the business afloat.

Suddenly he was filled with a frantic urge to turn left onto the road out of town—and just disappear. Afterward he always felt he was going to make that turn. How far he would have gone is, of course, unknown. But into the midst of his inner turmoil there came a command: “Pull over to the curb.”

As he relates it, it was as if the words were written on the windshield. After he pulled over, there came to him, as though someone with him in the car said these words: “My Son had strains that you will never know, and when he had those strains he turned to me, and that’s what *you* should do.”

After hearing these words Robert sat at the wheel for a long

time, sobbing aloud. He then drove on to his Long Beach office, where he faced twenty-two major, outstanding problems. All the most significant problems—whether they concerned company disagreements, clients' deciding to remain with his agency, payments by clients of sizable, late premiums or whatever—were substantially resolved by that day's end.

Wilhelm Hermann, a great theologian of the late nineteenth century, goes so far as to mark the Christian out in terms of a personal communion with God. "We hold a man to be really a Christian when we believe we have ample evidence that God has revealed himself to him in Jesus Christ, and that now the man's inner life is taking on a new character through his communion with the God who is thus manifest."³ Spiritual formation into Christlikeness—true change of character—comes from living in relationship to God.

More recently the English philosopher and theologian John Baillie wrote, "Our knowledge of God rests on the revelation of his personal presence. . . . Of such a presence it must be true that to those who have never been confronted with it argument is useless, while to those who have, it is superfluous."⁴

The faith in a God who speaks personally to the soul is nowhere recorded more plainly than in the hymns of the church, from all ages, sung week by week by the church as it congregates and day by day by Christians as they go about their lives at work, at home, at play: "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us," "All the Way My Savior Leads Me," "Lead On, O King Eternal," "Where He Leads Me," "Lead Kindly Light," "He Leadeth Me," "Holy Spirit, Faithful Guide," "Jesus Savior, Pilot Me," "If Thou But Suffer God to Guide Thee," "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah" and "Jesus, Still Lead On." This brief list hardly begins to mention all the hymns devoted to personal divine guidance and the conversational communion of the soul with God. The words of these hymns follow a familiar pattern:

He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.⁵

The Paradox

In the light of all this it is not an exaggeration to speak of a *paradox* in the contemporary experience and understanding of hearing God. This paradox seriously hinders our practical faith.

On the one hand, we have massive testimony to and widespread faith in God's personal, guiding communication with us—far more than mere providential and blindly controlling guidance. This is not only recorded in Scripture and emblazoned upon church history, but it also lies at the heart of our worship services and our individual relationships with God.

Receiving guidance from God actually serves as the basis of authority for our teachers and leaders. Rarely do people profess to teach and lead the people of God on the basis of their education, natural talents and denominational connections alone. Authority in spiritual leadership derives from a life in the Spirit, from the leader's personal encounter and ongoing relationship with God.

On the other hand, we also find a pervasive and often painful uncertainty about how hearing God's voice actually works today and what its place is in the church and in the Christian's life. Even those who firmly believe that they have been addressed or directly spoken to by God may be at a loss to know what is happening or what to do about it. In the Bible, poor flustered Gideon said to the Lord, who in some fashion stood before him, "Do something to prove that you are the one who is speaking to me!" (Judg 6:17, paraphrase).

Even if we were to beg for a word from God, we may have so little clarity on what it should be like and so little competence in dealing with it, that when it comes it will only add to our confusion. I be-

lieve that this is one reason such a word may be withheld from us by God when it would otherwise be appropriate and helpful.

Our need for understanding is clearly very great. We are all too familiar with the painful confusion of individuals who make huge efforts to determine God's will for themselves—people who are frequently very sincere and devout. We see them make dreadful errors by following a whim or chance event that, because of their desperation, they *force* to serve as a sign from God. We see them sink into despair, skepticism, even cynicism, often accompanied by a continuation of religious routine that becomes utterly mechanical and dead. They “know,” on the basis of what has happened to them, that for all practical purposes they are simply “on their own.”

We are also all too familiar, even if only through newspaper accounts, with the tragic domination of groups by those who lay claim to a special sign or word from God. Religious dictators are in unceasing supply and show up in surprising guises and places. Often they are not effectively resisted precisely because the other members of the group have no clear idea, tested and proven in experience, of how such a word from God really works. They are vulnerable to madness in the name of God.

First Steps Toward a Solution

As disciples of Jesus Christ, I believe we cannot abandon faith in our ability to hear from God. To abandon this is to abandon the reality of a personal relationship with God, and that we must not do. Our hearts and minds, as well as the realities of the Christian tradition, stand against it.

The paradox about hearing God's voice must, then, be resolved and removed by providing believers with a *clear understanding* and a *confident, practical orientation toward God's way of guiding us and communicating with us*, which is the aim of the chapters that follow. But before we can even begin working on this task, there are

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.

I fear that many people seek to hear God solely as a device for obtaining their own safety, comfort and sense of being righteous.

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?

5. Should a leader who claims to have been spoken to by God ever be questioned about it? How might one intelligently go about this in a spirit of love?
6. Everything considered, would you *really* like to be spoken to by God?

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