

Hearing the Voice of the Spirit

John 16:12-15; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Wonder (Wow!)

How do you know that you have in some way heard from God ... that the Holy Spirit has communicated with or without words? The minds of many people will immediately go to some kind of transcendent spiritual experience ... an experience that took them if only temporarily beyond the bounds of ordinary human existence and allowed them with a sense of wonder to touch the divine and eternal.

Lynette and I recently had that kind of experience while on a helicopter touring the Hawaiian island of Kauai. The pilot took us to his favorite spot on the island ... the collapsed caldera of the ancient volcano Mount Wai'ale'ale and its 3000 foot Wall of Tears. The top of Wai'ale'ale receives 450 inches of rain a year and is the wettest spot on earth. If you hit it right, as we did that morning after rain showers went through, the wall becomes a series of waterfalls that frankly take your breath away ... Wow! ... and brought tears to both our eyes. The wall along with the crater (called the Blue Hole) provide a natural cathedral where the awesome grandeur of God's creative work is on display ... a foretaste of the beauty of heaven. It was an experience of the Spirit without words.

I'm part of a generation of folks who have sought out that kind of transcendent experience, sometimes in less than healthy ways. Drugs, sex, music, exotic spiritual practices, communal living experiences, or any combination thereof have driven the Baby Boomer spiritual quest. As one Boomer pastor put it, "*We want, as a generation, to move beyond philosophical discussions of religion to the actual experience of God in our lives. The boomer heart, like every human heart, has always cried out for a personal experience with God.*" It's what has pushed the growth of Pentecostal and charismatic churches which have emphasized the personal experience of the Holy Spirit, with a special focus on the gift of speaking in tongues. And even if I think it misguided to make the gift of tongues the primary evidence of the Spirit's presence, I appreciate the desire to not just talk about the Holy Spirit but to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

And yes, there will be "wow" moments when the Spirit's presence is palpable and the Spirit's communication clear. So it was for the Apostle John: "***It was the Lord's Day, and I was worshiping in the Spirit. Suddenly, I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet blast. It said, "Write in a book everything you see, and send it to the seven churches in the cities ... "*** When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire ..."

(Revelation 1:10–16, NLT) Wow indeed ... the sheer wonder of receiving from the Holy Spirit a vision of Jesus in heavenly splendor ... he had seen Jesus glorified on the Mount of Transfiguration but now it was on Jesus' eternal throne. How he could he not but write of this revelation no matter how inadequate the words.

Yet arguably, this was not an everyday experience for John or any other follower of Jesus for that matter. And the good news is that you and I don't have to have a heavenly vision or go to Hawaii to experience wonder before God. As we sing at Christmas, there is the "wonder of his love." (Joy to the World). The Apostle Paul speaks of his desire for his readers: **"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."** (Ephesians 3:17–19, NIV84) You have reason to be filled with wonder that God knows you inside and out and despite your shortcoming and failures, loves you completely, without limit. The Holy Spirit seeks to give you a settled confidence that God has claimed you as his daughter or son. Paul writes, **"For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."** (Romans 8:15–16, NIV84) Guys say this with me: "I am his son." Women your turn, "I am his daughter." The Holy Spirit has brought you into an eternal relationship with the God of the universe. Wow indeed. And I hope that daily you take at least a few moments to reflect on that love and even and especially on difficult days, to recognize all the blessings that give evidence of that love. Say to God along with the psalm writer, **"Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes."** (Psalm 17:7, NIV84)

Word (Who and What)

Wonder-filled experiences with the Holy Spirit are to be celebrated, but the reality is that such experiences are not the primary way we hear the Spirit's voice. Rather, most often God uses ordinary words, not helicopter rides or visions. As author Dallas Willard explains, God normally speaks to us through the use of human words and through human voices because "it most fully engages the faculties of free, intelligent beings who are socially interacting with agape love in the work of God as his co-laborers and friends." In other words, most of the time, God honors us as people created in his image and expresses his love and truth by speaking our language.

Now for those of you who have grown tired of an endless stream of seemingly weak words that flow from politicians and yes, preachers, don't underestimate the power of words even without the Holy Spirit. Think about the impact of these statements on American history:

"Give me liberty or give me death." (Patrick Henry)

"... that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion." (Abraham Lincoln)

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." (Franklin D. Roosevelt)

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

If that’s the power of human words, how much more the Word of God! God spoke all of creation into being: **“Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.”** (Genesis 1:2–3, NIV84) God’s word has the power to make reality and he continues to speak life-giving words into his creation and especially into the lives of people. **“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish ... so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”** (Isaiah 55:10–11, NIV84)

Jesus promised his followers that even as he would leave them bodily, the Holy Spirit would come to speak God’s Word to them beyond what he could now teach them.¹² **“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”** (John 16:12–13, ESV)

This speaking, revealing work of the Holy Spirit took on its most authoritative form as he inspired ancient writers (Old and New Testament) to compose that collection of books we call the Bible. We believe this to be the written Word of God in that the Holy Spirit moved the writers to convey divine truth and the Bible thus forms the foundation for our faith (2 Peter 1:21). We also believe that the Holy Spirit speaks to us through the Bible not just because he inspired it, but because he enables us to understand and believe God’s Word and apply it to our own life situations. It is not that the Holy Spirit just guided the first Christ followers and now that we have the Bible, we are good on our own. We continue to need the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth and there is no substitute for our own Spirit-enabled reading and reflection on the words of Scripture.

In particular, we need the Holy Spirit to enable us to grasp the core “Who” and “What” of our salvation as the Bible reveals it. The central “Who” is Jesus, God the Son, who has taken on our humanity to give up his life sacrificially on the cross for us. It seems crazy to believe that the horrible of execution of a 1st century rabbi could have any significance then or now. As the Apostle Paul puts it: **“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing”** (1 Corinthians 1:18, NIV84) And Paul knew that only way any of us could believe the cross is God’s power to save us is that Holy Spirit works such faith in us. This is the key theme of 1 Corinthians 2: **“However, as it is written: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”— but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.”** (1 Corinthians 2:9–10, NIV84) We continue to read the Gospel story in the Bible because we want the Holy Spirit to take away our doubts and give us confidence in our crucified Savior.

Paul continues in verse 12. ¹² ***“We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”*** (1 Corinthians 2:12–13, NIV84) The Spirit speaks to us in the pages of the Bible with the central teaching focusing on Jesus our Savior and Lord. Building on that foundation, the Spirit has continued to move pastors, church workers, theologians, writers, and composers to speak (and sing!) his truth to his people, to us. Our words don’t have the same foundational authority as the Scriptures themselves, but if you don’t believe the Holy Spirit speaks to you through me or the other pastors, you should go to another church. Because you need to hear the Spirit through contemporary voices as well as ancient writers. All of this points to the significance of reading and listening to Christian teachers who the Spirit will use to explain the Scriptures and apply God’s Word to your life.

In like manner, don’t downplay opportunities to hear the Spirit speak through Christian friends and family members. I can almost guarantee that for those of you who are married, your spouse wants to be the voice of God in your life (just kidding!). But this is why we put so much emphasis here at Peace on relationships of spiritual influence ... in Life Groups, in coaching and mentoring relationships, prayer partnerships, and friendships. We want to hear the Spirit through each other. It’s worth noting the emphasis on this in our coach training. We believe that there are three parties in a coaching conversation: the coach, the person being coached, and the Holy Spirit. Coaches want not to give a lot of their advice but rather to help individuals listen to the Spirit’s direction in their lives.

Which brings us to the most subjective element of the Spirit’s speaking: the voice of the Spirit in our minds and spirits ... what in the story of the prophet Elijah is labeled as the “still small voice” or the “gentle whisper.” As we saturate our minds with God’s truth over the years of our lives, we can expect that the Spirit will draw such truth from our memories at key moments, especially truth that we are neglecting and need to hear.

Pastor Craig Miller was engaged in silent retreat during a period of struggle in his relationship with his church. He was sitting near a pond when some ducks approached him, but then swam away when they saw he had nothing to feed them. Miller thought to himself, “Isn’t that like the church? If you don’t have something to give them, they ignore you.” Then a woman appeared on the other side of the pond with crackers and all the ducks flew over to her. Miller reflected, “Isn’t that just like the church? When someone else has something to offer, people will go to them and leave you behind.” Then unexpectedly, the woman began walking toward Miller, put the crackers into his hand, and kept right on walking. He heard God’s saying in that moment, “I will give you what you need to feed the church.” With tears in his eyes, he began throwing crackers to the frolicking ducks. Mere coincidence? Vivid imagination? Perhaps. But Craig Miller can’t fully describe just how important this experience of God’s gentle whisper was in his life. It points to our need to get away regularly from all the voices that compete for our attention so that we can hear from God.

Worldview (Way)

Over months and years of hearing the Spirit speak through Scripture, teaching, conversations with other Christians, and his guiding voice within us, the result is that the Spirit's love and truth transforms our minds ... not perfectly by any means, but increasingly our thoughts are aligned to his thoughts, our desires to his desires. This is what I think lies behind the Apostle Paul's seemingly arrogant words that conclude this section: ***"For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.***" 1 Corinthians 2:16 (NIV84) How dare he claim as a mere sinful human being to have the mind of Christ? Well, the Holy Spirit has given him a different way of seeing and thinking and desiring and acting. The streams of consciousness running through Paul and through faithful Christians today get diverted by the Holy Spirit to be his voice of wisdom and truth. You are hearing the voice of the Spirit in your mind and don't even realize it because that has become your own dominant mode of thought, way of seeing, way of living.

This is especially emphasized in Paul's language in Romans 8. ***"The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;"*** (Romans 8:6, NIV84) Looks in English like the same word we find in 1 Corinthians 2: "mind." But it's actually a different Greek word, not the more common "nous" but rather "phronesis" which has no direct English equivalent. "Phronesis" is the directed mind, the mind that that made a commitment, that strives toward a particular goal. Paul states here that we can have minds set on our sinful self; or we can have minds that have come under the control of the Holy Spirit.

The best translation of "phronesis" might well be the concept of worldview ... the essential lenses through which we see the world and make our commitments. Authors Wilkens and Sanford believe that at the heart of worldview are the story or stories we commit to and then live out (and we live in a world with a number of competing stories). Which speaks to why in our own new Three Stories process, we want to help connect your story with God's story. Because we believe the Holy Spirit will use this connection to mess with the core of who you are in the best way, leading you in the direction of a Christian worldview ... to possess more of the mind of Christ. Some of you might be thinking, "I don't know if I'm ready for that." Others of you are thinking, "I want more than anything to be directed by the Spirit's voice." Well, the Spirit keeps speaking. Are you and I listening?