

## When We Begin Hearing Voices

by Pastor Marty

In our current technologically-advanced society, almost everybody owns a cell phone. If you do, you know how annoying and frustrating it can be when you are unable to get a signal. This inability to connect can result in anything from minor inconvenience to full desperation in a life-threatening emergency. However, there can be problems even when we do get a signal: a bad connection. It can be more frustrating when you can actually speak with a person but not hear or understand everything that is being communicated. This may be worse than having no signal because there is a higher potential for misunderstanding or misinterpreting what the other person said. I expect we have all had an experience in which there has been some type of misunderstanding or miscommunication in a face-to-face conversation with somebody. It is a consequence of our fallen world—and our poor language skills—that what is said may not be the same as what is heard. For example, I once had a stressful discussion with someone over lunch. I had innocently mentioned that another person's actions indicated he was melancholy. One of the people there began to argue that I was making an unfair judgment. Over an hour later, we realized we were using the word "melancholy" differently. The context and the definition of our words have an impact. When we then factor in communication by telephone, email, and text messaging, the potential for error increases drastically. If we do not factor in the potential for error, error becomes common.

***If we do not factor in the potential for error, then error becomes a certainty.***

As disciples of Jesus, we have a personal and dynamic relationship through Him with the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent Creator of the entire universe. The One who knew Him best referred to Him as our heavenly Abba-Father and described him as good, holy, loving, and true. However, understanding the potential for misunderstanding, Jesus also took the time to explain what the Father is not: He is not dishonest, deceptive, inconsistent, selfish, and an extremely long list of other adjectives. Why did Jesus take the time to tell us what God was like? He could have said God is "Father" and left it at that. He certainly knew everything the term entailed, and nobody who truly knows Him would ever accuse Him of misspeaking, of using the wrong word, or of meaning the wrong thing. He could have said it with the perfect knowledge of what He meant and left it at that. However, He recognized that especially in our broken world, what one person says is not always what another person hears; He knew that our experiences might lead us to associate some very different adjectives with the simple term "father," which could give us a decidedly incorrect view of our Creator God. Therefore, He took the time to explain what He meant.

***Nobody who truly knows Him could ever accuse Him of not meaning what He said.***

We now live in a decidedly postmodern society. At its roots, postmodernism is founded on the premise that each person is responsible for his or her own interpretations. This applies to more than just accountability, however, for it also includes ability and authority. The concept

is often traced back to the field of linguistics. In the study of language, as we briefly discussed already, what one person says may not be what another person hears. However, as is often the case, any truth can be taken to an extreme and turned into error. In this case, the argument was presented that because no two people are ever exactly alike, no hearer could be 100% absolutely certain what any speaker meant. The result, veering as far from the truth as possible, is that the instant words have been spoken or written, their meaning becomes lost. In other words, if we cannot know a person's thoughts with the same level of completely unmistakable perfection as the omniscient, omnipresent, and infallible Creator of the universe, then we really cannot trust that we can know anything at all.

***If we cannot know something as perfectly as God, we cannot know anything at all.***

The result was that the meanings of all communications—both spoken and written—are open for interpretation. With this being the case, no one interpretation can be guaranteed to be more accurate than any other—only God knows perfectly—so any interpretation has as much right to be believed as any other. This led to the premise that for all intents and purposes, concrete meaning in both spoken and written language no longer existed; only interpretation existed. With this being the case, not even the original author of a text could invalidate other interpretations of the text because the author would still be interpreting the interpretation. As would be expected, God's Word became one of the primary texts to be redefined, which of course eradicated all claims of absolute truth. If God's Word was now open to interpretation, then the God described in the Word was also

open to interpretation. God became a concept that was personal and different for each person in whatever way fit his or her interpretation. Each person now made God in his or her own image. Because there is no longer any existing reference for absolute truth, absolute truth, in essence, no longer exists; each person is now their own authority or what is ultimately true.

***When there is no longer any absolute reference for truth, truth ceases to exist.***

In a very real sense, postmodernism is a manifestation of pride: the creature instead of the Creator now has become the total center of reality. However, the Church is somewhat responsible for this development. During the late middle ages, the Roman Catholic Church began to allow some human teachings to be held to the same standard of absolute authority as God's Word. Although councils were held to address these issues, not all of them were fully corrected. The Protestant Reformation resulted when some leaders refused to address certain necessary changes. However, as is often the case and as was mentioned previously, when a truth is taken to an extreme, it usually results in a new type of error. Protestants, rejecting the institutional structure of the Church in which "legitimate" interpretation of the Scripture was decided hierarchically, instead claimed that each person should go directly to the Bible for truth, evaluating and deciding it themselves. In the attempt to correct one error, they formed another: each person individually interpreted the Bible. Foreshadowing of postmodernism, each person now decides what is actually true.

***Like Postmodernism, the Reformation allowed each person to decide what is true.***

Paul explains very clearly in his letter to the Romans that the sinful nature constantly pulls the soul toward destruction. Like gravity, it is a constant force as long as we live on this planet. It is the spiritual force of entropy in our life. Sin first revealed itself in Lucifer through pride—an attitude that led to an action. He, in reaction to God, tempted the first husband and wife to do the same: decide that they knew what was true better than God and act on it. Whether we describe how sin first appeared or how it entered our world, it still comes down to pride, an attitude of viewing oneself as the one authorized to decide what is actually true and the actions resulting from that attitude. Paul states that the only way the sinful nature can be overcome by learning to continually depend upon the Holy Spirit, making Him the Center. If we walk in the Spirit, we will not walk according to the sinful nature; the law of the Spirit of life supersedes the law of sin and death. Part of the reason this is true is because in order for us to depend on the Holy Spirit and walk in the Spirit, we must remain focused on Spirit as the center and final authority of truth in our lives. Walking in the Spirit, therefore, removes us from the place of final authority in deciding what is true.

***Walking in the Spirit removes us from being our own final authority in our life.***

When we start to depend on the Spirit in our lives, we necessarily have to learn how to listen for His voice, leading us and speaking to us. This presents us with a bit of a paradox: the activity that leads us to humility can result in even greater pride if we are not careful. We all are aware of people who were operating in very powerful and anointed ministries but who fell, either through sin or deception. However,

it is rarely an instantaneous fall; usually, there are building temptations and a habit pattern of bad choices. I am not saying this is always the case, but it is in some cases. Most importantly, there may be a point where the person begins to feel “safe” from temptation, which becomes the place where a blind spot is formed in the person’s perception. Pride, by its very nature, is blindness to the truth. It works to desensitize the person both to its presence and to its destruction. Pride lives and thrives in the dark.

***Pride, by its very nature, is blindness to the truth; it lives and thrives in the dark.***

At this point, some of you are probably wondering where this newsletter is going or if it will ever get there. I have mentioned cell phone reception, communication misunderstandings, postmodern relativism, and the sin of pride. It seems I have been all over the place, but this is where everything connects together: learning to discern the voices we hear. If we cannot tell the difference between our voice and the voice of the Holy Spirit, then there is no limit to the mistakes we will make; if we factor in the voice of the enemy and the voices of others, we find ourselves needing grace even more. I certainly am not an authority in this, but I believe I may have a few helpful suggestions I can provide.

***We are in great trouble if we cannot discern the source of the voices we hear.***

We have already discussed how pride is essentially a blindness concerning the full truth about ourselves. However, there is an aspect of mishearing God that is not related to pride or humility but to a full understanding of the way God created us, man and woman in His image. I will discuss more about the nature of masculine and feminine at some point, but it is enough to

recognize that individually, we do not all want the same things in the same ways. For some of us, calling supersedes a desire for relationships while for others, a home and a family is greater than any work or position. We all have desires in our own hearts for certain things. Humility requires that we recognize that not all of our desires are good because some of them come from our sinful nature, some come from our brokenness and immaturity, and some even come from our own simple desire to love God and others. If we wish to learn to hear the voice of God in our lives, we first have to be able to discern those voices that come from ourselves.

**Know thy self.** This simple ancient Greek proverb contains a significant amount of truth. In a way, we are all afflicted with all of the disorders known to humankind. Until we find wholeness in Christ, we are all somewhat schizophrenic. It is the voice of our sinful nature that speaks to us—sometimes loudly and sometimes softly—to lust, resent, boast, and a host of other verbs. It is only pride or deception to think that once we have become Christians, we are instantly able to discern this voice without error. If this were true, James would not have had to explain why some prayers are not answered. It is safe to say that sometimes we think God is telling us something, but it is actually just our own sinful nature speaking in a very religious voice. There are other times when it is not our sinful nature that we hear but our human nature, desiring to love or bless another person. Although love is a good thing, human love and Godly love are not identical. We may have great compassion for a person, and in our desire to help that person, we can hear what our heart is saying instead of what

the Holy Spirit is saying. This may not be sinful, but it is placing ourselves in the position of God for the person, which can only lead to trouble.

**Know thy enemy.** The Bible tells us we are in a situation where there are other voices whispering to us. Some of these voices are very intent on creating confusion and destruction; I am speaking about those same voices that lead us into temptation and deception—those that follow the father of lies. As much as we wish these voices identified themselves clearly, they are not intent on being clear; they try as hard as they can to sound like God and masquerade as actual messages of light. If our first parents, with no sinful nature to afflict them, were not able to recognize deception in the voice of the serpent, we should recognize pride if we think it is not a problem for us. It does not minimize the work of the Holy Spirit in us to realize that the deceiver is called “the deceiver” because he is skilled at deceiving; if it were easy to discern his tricks, there would not be multiple warnings and admonitions in the New Testament to take care not to be misled by his ways. If we truly desire truth, we must desire to know when we are wrong more than we desire to be right.

**Know thy friend.** In this world, we often hear other voices, which can be much harder to discern than those of our own hearts or of our enemies: voices of other people in our lives. We can usually distinguish between those speaking with Godly wisdom from those speaking in the flesh, but I have learned there is no guarantee that the Godly make no mistake and the sinner gets nothing right. There have been times in my life when some who know God much better than I gave me “godly counsel” that turned out to be so contrary to what God was actually

saying that it caused widespread destruction in my life, some of which I still deal with today; on the other hand, I have on rare occasions gotten truly wise advice from people living a life that was as pagan as is humanly possible. In both cases, it is necessary to realize that all people are fallible and make mistakes. It is precisely for this reason we must learn to hear God's voice instead of relying on others to hear Him for us.

**To thine own self be true.** What do we do to guard ourselves against mistaking our flesh or our own heart for the Spirit? As a rule, we should be extremely skeptical of any voice that happens to coincide with our own personal feelings toward a person or situation. Although it certainly could be God, there is a significant chance it is actually our own voice. Until we have learned how to discern the difference, we should discount any voices that do not pass a few tests: (1) Decide upon a specific amount of time to seek God for confirmation on it; once you have decided on that time frame, double it. (2) Search your own heart to identify if this is something you want God to say. This requires recognizing what you yourself desire, which can be a huge learning curve in itself. (3) Recognize the bias of your own calling. This is difficult to describe, but it is reflected in some of the Old Testament prophetic passages. It is when we see prophets deviate from their usual mode—when a prophet of love pronounces judgment, when a prophet of doom offers grace, or when a prophet of words does an act of power—it is precisely then that the passage has the greatest effect. This is because we see the tendency in them toward a specific type of word. John the Baptist, who recognized Jesus before anyone else, began to doubt Jesus was the Messiah

because He saw Him spending most of His time healing instead of preaching repentance. John expected to hear what fit with his own calling. We tend to accept *with less evaluation* things that coincide with our own calling. (4) Seek counsel from others who have Godly wisdom and true discernment. There is a reason that the wisest man in the world said that there is victory in an abundance of counselors. As we have seen, people do make mistakes, but there is much less of a chance that many people will make the same mistake than one person will make a mistake. We just remember that even the counsel of Godly people must be taken to the Lord for confirmation. (5) Consider that all voices you hear are probably not of God if you are not actively part of a church congregation that involves accountability and discernment. Paul commands that Christians were not to separate themselves from the congregation of believers because we all have blind spots. As mentioned, if we believe we do not have any blind spots, it is pride. It is when we are in the congregation of believers that there is the best opportunity for us to see someone else's blind spot and they to see ours. (6) Take the confirmation of your "kindred spirits" with a grain of salt. I have heard some say that they surround themselves with friends who provide accountability, so they do not need to be active in a church body, but there is a major problem here: we tend to surround ourselves with those who see things similar to how we see things. In other words, we tend to group with others with the same blind spots. We need those who see things differently from us to advise and correct us. (7) There is one more practical thing you can do . . . but I will let you hear that from God.