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“Listen and Cooperate—What Christians Who Know the Lord are Supposed to Do”¹

What does God expect of those who believe in Christ and want to please him? I’m not referring to any set of concrete actions or behaviors for individuals and communities at the moment. Rather, I’m talking more broadly about the fundamental character of a believer’s relationship with God, including how we are called to respond to God’s revelation of himself and of truth in all its forms. According to biblical teaching, what does God most want from believers in terms of a heart and life response to him?

The answer to this question lies in an adequate understanding of the true nature of Christian spirituality, which provides the context in which we are able to please God with our response to his revelations. On the individual and communal levels, Christian spirituality goes beyond acceptance of Christian *religion*—its doctrines, Scriptures, history, practices, and traditions. Spirituality refers essentially to the nature and quality of our *relationship* with God, and Christian spirituality, more specifically, links a believer to God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the

¹ Much of this article is an expansion of material found in chapter one of my most recent book, *Saying Yes to God: How to Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017).

Holy Spirit in personal, experiential ways, individually, in community, and in society.²

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, a personal relationship with God is sometimes referred to as “knowing the Lord,” an experiential knowledge that is to be distinguished from belief or knowledge of facts or adherence to tradition. For example, the writer of 1 Samuel explains to the reader why young Samuel didn’t recognize the calling of Yahweh as a lack of a personal relationship with God. He simply says, “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord. The word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him” (1 Samuel 3:7). In Old Testament times, knowing the Lord in such a personal way may have been rare or occasional, but Jeremiah looked forward to a day when all believers would “know the Lord” on a regular, ongoing way, as participants in a “new covenant” (Jer. 31:34). By the time we get to the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews, for example, goes to great lengths to describe the nature of this new covenant. He cites Jeremiah in order to demonstrate to Jewish readers that what Christians experience as a faith in Jesus Christ and the moving of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that some day all believers would “know the Lord” (e.g., Heb. 8:11).

Broadly speaking, we find in New Testament theology, whether derived from individual biblical writers or from a synthesis of the 27 books taken as a whole, that God revealed God-self in human form in the person of Jesus and that one of the hallmarks of Christian experience is to live by the Holy Spirit.³ In fact, New Testament scholar James Dunn argues that one of the main

² I am not suggesting that believers identifying with other religions, or no religion at all, cannot and do not experience God in conscious ways as well. Rather, I am focusing in this article on biblical teaching on a personal relationship with the triune God as it is uniquely experienced by Christians.

³ I develop this theme in a recent article, “What It Means to ‘Keep in Step with the Spirit’—

reasons the New Testament books were written was to make sense of the advent of Jesus and the Christians' experience of the Holy Spirit in light of Jewish beliefs and teaching.⁴ In other words, while the Old and New Testaments are inextricably linked, what makes the new covenant so special is that all believers could now have an ongoing personal relationship with God specifically through a relationship with Christ and the Holy Spirit.

At this point, we are not going to go into further depth as to what it means to “know the Lord” in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This article assumes a biblical understanding of Christian spirituality that goes beyond merely knowing *about* Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and beyond a social-communal identification with the Christian tradition. Our focus will be on the fundamental expectation found repeatedly in the Bible of those who know the Lord in the personal ways we have been describing. In other words, we turn now to our leading question for this article. For those who truly know the Lord, what does God most want from them? The biblical answer is that we would learn to listen for God's voice and then cooperate with God's leading as a way of life.

Listening is a biblical imperative

The expectation that believers will listen to God is everywhere in Scripture. The call to “hear” or “listen” appears either explicitly or implicitly in literally hundreds of verses in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, and usually signals that the prophet or teacher is going to reveal the will of God or give instructions to believers that must be followed.

A Careful Interpretation of Galatians 5:25 and Its Implications for Practical Christian Living” (Chin Christian Journal, Vol. 4 [2017]).

⁴ See James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction*. The Library of Biblical Theology, edited by General Editor Leo Perdue (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

For example, the Hebrew verb, “shema” (שמע, translated, “to hear”), appears in one of the most important Old Testament texts, traditionally known as *the Shema*⁵: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, NIV). These verses are foundational in the Judeo-Christian tradition, because they affirm monotheism and introduce the commandment to love God with all one’s being, a directive Jesus later called the greatest commandment of all.⁶ The point of significance here is, first, that the content of the teaching includes the call to “hear” the Word of God and is not simply an introduction to what follows. To listen to the voice of God is constitutive of a right relationship with God. Then, as a second and equally important point, when one listens to God the most important message one will ever hear will have to do with love.

Listening to God includes listening to Jesus and the Holy Spirit

Starting with the New Testament, Jesus becomes the one we are to listen to. Jesus stands at the center of God’s revelation of himself and of all that is good, right and true.⁷ At Jesus’ baptism, God the Father says, “This is my Son, whom I have chosen; *listen* to him” (Luke 9:35, italics added).

⁵ Deuteronomy 6:4; the verb is also found in Deuteronomy at 4:1; 5:1; 6:3 and 9:1.

⁶ The Shema sets the stage for the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy. In Hebrew tradition ever since, the Shema has also formed an important part of the Jewish evening and morning prayer, as part of a confession of faith. Jesus’s teaching on the primacy of love can be found in all of the Gospels: Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27. Compare to John 13:34; 1 John 4:21.

⁷ See, e.g., John 14:9. Cf. Colossians 1:15-19.

Following in the Hebrew tradition he inherited, the rabbi Jesus would call his disciples to listen to him as a way of getting their attention and signaling that he was about to say something of great significance (example, Luke 9:44). Often he would introduce a parable or some other teaching to the crowd by calling out, “Listen!”⁸

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke of himself as both the good shepherd and the gate, whose sheep “listen to his voice” (10:3). Jesus adds that there are sheep that are not from the same pen who also “listen to my voice” (10:16). When confronted by Pontius Pilate, Jesus declared, “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (18:37).

After Jesus’s death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit takes his place as the day to day guide for believers. Before his death, Jesus spoke of the coming Spirit of truth, who would “teach [them] all things and remind [them] of everything I [Jesus] have said to [them]” (14:17, 26). The implication was that it would be very important for Jesus’s disciples to be listening for the voice of the Spirit, who would be sent by God to tell them what they needed to hear.

At the end of his long upper room discourse, Jesus returns to the subject of the Spirit and his important role in the lives of his disciples:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.* He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:12–15, italics added)

⁸ See Matthew 13:18; 15:10; 21:33; Mark 4:3; 7:14; Luke 9:44; 18:16.

Bible scholar, professor, and author Jack Levison rightly argues that Jesus was not saying that the Spirit's role is to guide all followers of all times into new truth, but rather to help Jesus's disciples to understand what they could not accept at the time of his earthly ministry, namely who he was and the suffering he had to endure on behalf of humanity. Thus, on one hand, we should not think that the Spirit will be the source of revealing all truth on all subjects to all people on an ongoing basis. Jesus' promise of the Spirit, as found in John 16, was primarily for his disciples, who would need help to make sense of Jesus' crucifixion and glorification.⁹

At the same time, the fact that the Spirit was God's tool for opening the minds, refreshing the memories, and zeroing in on truth for the disciples indicates that these are the kinds of things the Spirit does—not just for the apostles but in anyone with whom the Spirit has contact. Yes, believers today find truth by looking to Scripture to see what the Spirit said to the apostles who wrote the books of the Bible; but they also need the Spirit to convince them of the truth that they read. This was Paul's point exactly when he explained to the Corinthians that their faith was the result of the demonstration of the Spirit and power. Philosophers of his day and Jewish religious authorities, who relied on self-evident truths, their traditions, or their own rational abilities to determine truth, were rejecting the Gospel as foolishness. Yet, those who experienced the Spirit in the process of hearing the Gospel became believers. (1 Corinthians 2:4-14)

Similarly, Paul reminded the Thessalonians of the role of the Spirit in their experience that led them to faith. He wrote, "Our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in

⁹ Jack Levison, *Inspired: The Holy Spirit and the Mind of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013) p. 150.

power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:10). Amid all the competing voices, ideologies, religious notions, surging emotions, and other challenges to knowing God and perceiving God’s will, the Spirit gives us an ability to discern truth as we read the words of Spirit-led apostles, prophets and teachers that we find in the Bible.

Listening to the Spirit, then, is so much more than learning Bible verses or doctrine based on Scripture. Scripture is intended to lead us to Christ and to a living relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. By the Scriptures we can know who God is, the meaning of Christ’s life and death, and what God wants for our lives in general. Scripture teaches us the way of salvation, directs us, re-directs us when we’ve gone astray, and equips us for good works (2 Timothy 3:15-16; Hebrews 4:12). Yet, it is God (not the words on the page alone) who opens our eyes to be able to see the “wonderful things” in Scripture (Psalm 119:18).

The Spirit brings out truth to us in ways that enlighten us and transform us, by drawing us closer to God, opening our eyes to the truth about Christ, and showing us how to follow Christ and live out the truths of Scripture in our everyday life. What might start as a word from God prompted by Scripture develops and expands as we listen for how to apply what we’ve heard in any number of practical, day-to-day situations. When the Spirit speaks, then, we should expect to hear important truths pertaining to our relationship with God, to the person and work of Christ, and to what it means to follow Christ.

Cooperating is a biblical expectation

More than anything else, after listening for the voice of the Spirit, what God wants from us is our “Yes.” Scripture makes clear that true believers, those who fear and trust in God, will

demonstrate their faith by listening to the voice of God and responding appropriately—that is, by believing God, trusting in God’s promises, and putting their faith into action by cooperating with God’s will and leading.

For example, when Abraham was told by God to leave Haran to travel to an unknown land that God would later show him, Abraham got up and left. (Genesis 12:1-4) Paul referred to Abraham as an example of someone who exemplified faith in God, i.e., believing God who would provide offspring for him and trusting that God would do as he promised.¹⁰ James, in referring to Abraham’s obedience to offer his son Isaac (though God stopped him before he did so), pointed to Abraham as an example of a believer who demonstrated his faith by his action. (James 2:21-24)

The Bible also contains stories about individuals who initially resist God’s call, but who eventually listen, accept, and serve in significant ways. Moses, for example tried to get out of his calling to deliver his people from slavery by not believing God really could use someone like him. But Moses said to God, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:11, NIV)? After asking several more questions, perhaps hoping to avoid this divine assignment, Moses finally resorted to pointing out his inadequacy—his poor verbal skills. (Exodus 4:10) Finally, despite his questions, hesitations, and fears, Moses accepted God’s call, and you know the rest of the story—Israel escaped from Egypt and was taken to the Promised Land.

¹⁰ See Romans 4:1:3, 13-21.

Chosen to serve as Moses' successor, Joshua took the mantle of leadership, listened to the Lord and called the people to listen as well. (Joshua 3:9) We read that the Israelites did in fact listen to Joshua, and he could lead Israel into the Promised Land. (Deuteronomy 34:9) Likewise, according to the book of Judges, many of the Old Testament judges heard from God, accepted the calling or instruction, and delivered their people from oppression. Samuel, as another example, heard the call of God when he was just a young boy, and when he finally understood it was the voice of God calling to him, he submitted to God's will and became one of the greatest prophets in all of Israel's history. (1 Samuel 3)

Esther did not hear an explicit call from God, but, with the help of her uncle Mordecai, recognized that she had been positioned as queen by God to serve God's purposes to save her people. At the risk of her life, she advocated to the king on behalf of her people, and saved them from genocide. Though the text does not say so explicitly, she clearly listened to God through Mordecai, and took action once she discerned that the word her uncle spoke was the word of God for her at that time, in that place. (Esther 4:14)

When Hebrew prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos and the others, heard the voice of God, they responded accordingly. Repeatedly, we read that listening was followed by action. In the case of the prophets, they usually responded by announcing to kings and common people alike whatever words the Spirit gave them, even if it resulted in imprisonment or threat of death.

In the New Testament, Jesus shows us that his whole life was one big response to the call of God to “serve and give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Likewise, Peter, John, James and the other early Christian leaders expected God to show them the truth about their calling and to guide them according to God’s will. They looked to what the Holy Spirit had already revealed in Scripture and were responsive to special words that came from God through a prophet, a vision, a dream, or in prayer. Paul’s whole ministry to the Gentiles was founded upon the Spirit’s calling and leading, and the building up of the church was the work of the Holy Spirit as well.

(Ephesians 4). As Jack Levison rightly points out, “[Paul’s] letters are shaped by the presence of scripture and the conviction that the holy spirit [sic] inspires, not just his ministry, but the entire work of the body of Christ.”¹¹

In summary, nearly every hero in the Bible, or simply anyone held up as an example of faith and faithfulness, *did* something—not to earn salvation, but as an appropriate response to God’s grace and call on his or her life. Regardless of whether faith calls for simply trusting in God or for taking some action, listening to God requires responding appropriately. Hearing and doing go together, as James points out with particularly pointedness: “... Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22, NRSV). The point of decision for the Spirit-led Christian will not be, “Will I agree with the Spirit in this situation or not?” but, “What do I need to do in order to be able to act on what I’m hearing?”

Can we really do what God requires?

However, Christians steeped in the Reformed tradition, including many Baptists, may wonder, is

¹¹ John Levison, *Inspired*, p. 162.

responding to the Spirit even possible? Is this an inspiring ideal, but unrealistic; or does God actually expect that we will be able to listen to the Spirit and act on what we hear?

To listen to the Apostle Paul, we might despair of ever having any ability to say “Yes” to the Spirit. For example, in his letter to the Galatians, he writes:

But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. (Gal. 3:22-23, NIV)

Paul is saying here that we humans are imprisoned by the power of sin—meaning that even though we may want to please God, we continually find our best intentions undermined by sinful impulses. Yet, Paul’s fatalism about the power of sin is only part of his teaching. God’s plan was to make us slaves to sin but not to leave us helpless and hopeless. God forces us to face our own limitations in order to first lead us to faith in Christ and then to teach us to rely upon an ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit to live the kind of life that pleases him. (Galatians 3:24; 5:16-25) Paul explains the movement from helplessness to freedom in the Spirit this way:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but *those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires*. The mind of sinful man is death, but *the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace*; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. *You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit*, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. (Romans 8:5-10, NIV, italics added)

In other words, the Apostle Paul did indeed teach that we are hopelessly imprisoned by the power of sin as far as thinking we can be righteous by our own efforts. Apart from Christ, there is no hope for salvation. (Romans 7:8-24; Romans 6:23) Yet, through faith in Christ, we may experience forgiveness. By the Spirit at work in our lives, every believer has access to divine

power to do the will of God. (8:1-11) By the Spirit, then, followers of Christ have the resources to say, “Yes” to the Spirit; and are expected to do so.

What changes

In the Catholic tradition, a believer’s “Yes” to God is known as “cooperation.” Catholics rely on the grace of God for salvation, but believe that the regenerated human being must work together with God to grow and to fulfill God’s will for their lives. Lutherans, uncomfortable with using any language that might sound too much like works-righteousness (i.e., humans earning their salvation or achieving higher levels of sanctification by their own power and effort), speak instead about “responding” to God’s grace. Different churches use different words to talk about how believers are to respond to God’s prompting, but all major Christian traditions teach similarly on this critical point: Salvation comes through Christ and is dependent on the grace of God at work your life, and by God’s believers can experience real change in their lives. The most appropriate response you can make to the Gospel is to believe this good news, be grateful, and offer your “Yes” to God in every possible way.

What will it look like to listen to God and respond accordingly as Spirit-led followers of Christ? According to Paul in his letter to the Galatians, we will experience more love, joy, and peace within ourselves. As we mature, we also will experience more inclination and power to love others in helpful ways—more patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22-23) We will also increasingly say, “No,” to sin, and, “Yes,” to all the good that God wants to do through us in the world. (Tit. 2:11-14; Eph. 2:10) Though the inner battle between good and evil, the Spirit and our sinful nature, rages on, by God’s grace we really are

different. To experience that difference on a daily basis, we have to consciously practice listening to God and cooperating with the leading of the Holy Spirit as a way of life.

Paul explains the opposing natures of sin and the Spirit, and the practical options—indulging the sinful nature versus living by love through the Spirit—this way:

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. (Gal. 5:13-17, NIV)

God’s part is to forgive us, to draw us to Christ, to change our hearts and minds, and to enable us to say, “Yes,” to the Spirit. God’s saving and redeeming activity in our lives is what Paul means when he says that we “live by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). Our part, when we have the option of choosing otherwise, is to exercise our will and freedom to do whatever is within our power to do, by the grace of God. This act of cooperation is what Paul was referring to when he urged the Galatians to “keep in step with the Spirit” in the face of constant temptation to be controlled by the sinful nature (5:16, 25).

Conclusion

Believers have a biblical mandate to listen to God and to respond appropriately by cooperating in every way we know how. We hear God’s voice through Scripture and through the Holy Spirit, who reveals truth to us and leads us in the ways God wants us to go. We cooperate by believing God’s word, by trusting in God’s working in our lives to fulfill his promises, and by doing whatever actions corresponds to God’s will and leading.

If we truly know the Lord, Christ will speak to us through the Spirit, and the Spirit will enable us to live like Christ in ways that flow from the character and will of God.¹² As we listen to the Spirit's voice, we will usually know what to do and will be able to think straight and to break free from our self-centered and sinful tendencies. By saying, "Yes," to the Spirit's leading in every way possible, we can move more and more fully into a Christ-centered, God-honoring life—for our own sakes, the sake of the church, and the sake of everyone whose life we touch.

In the Myanmar context, the practice of listening and cooperating as a spiritual discipline is not only relevant for our personal relationship with God. It is also relevant in the contexts of both the church and our relationships with our Buddhist and Muslim neighbors. In the church, we must learn to listen for the voice of God in our brothers and sisters in Christ, and cooperate better with however the Spirit may prompt us to love one another and work for greater harmony. In the broader, pluralistic society, listening will include paying attention to how God is at work in the lives of those he loves in other religions. Cooperation will include following the Spirit's prompting to reach out in love to those in need, to work together for the common good, and to share the hope that we have in Christ to those who do not know God's love or know the riches available to them through faith in Christ.

¹² So much of Paul's teaching stresses the new life to which we are called and can expect as followers of Christ who are Spirit-filled and Spirit-led. The Gospel he preached places hope for salvation squarely on grace through faith, while his understanding of true salvation always includes a transformed life by the working of the Spirit within a believer in Christ. See, for some notable examples, Galatians 5:16-25; Romans 8:1-16; 12:1-2; Philippians 2:12-16; Ephesians 2:8-10; 4:17-32; Titus 2:11-14.

The first priority for Christians who may only know about Christ or only understand their religious life as identifying with the Christian tradition (or church) is to move from head knowledge to heart knowledge, and to enter into a personal relationship with God through Christ. Knowing the Lord in a personal way will always be the top priority for Christians. But from there, we are called to fully embrace and enter more deeply into that relationship with God by learning how to listen well for the voice of God on a daily basis and by cooperating more and more with the leading of the Spirit in every aspect of our lives, as a way of life.

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