



How Do We Hear From God?

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by

Terry Arnold



T. A. Ministries
A Ministry of Teaching

PO Box 432, Babinda,
4861, Qld, Australia

Website: www.taministries.net

E-mail: taministries2@gmail.com

Ph. 0411489472

I want to share with you a most wonderful experience I had before writing this article: I was praying and God actually spoke to me! I heard the words clearly in my mind. The words had a ring of authority about them. There is no doubt I heard from God. I felt God's presence really close. As I pondered on His words, time seemed to slow up and many minutes passed to I do not know where. God still speaks to us today! He told me to keep standing on His Word and to be like a tree planted firmly and to delight in his words and ways. He told me he knows my ways and to meditate on what I had heard. He spoke to me personally!

Some readers at this point might be thinking and expecting some new revelation outside the word of God, extra biblical revelation given to the author by the Holy Spirit. But how did he speak to me? I was reading, meditating and praying on Psalm 1:1-6! ***'Blessed is the man that walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law does he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he does shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish'***

This experience has increased my love for the Bible as the final word of God, that revelation of Jesus Christ, the more sure word of prophecy - the prophecy of the scriptures, which Holy men of God once wrote down - the faith once delivered!

How does God speak to us today? Does he speak apart from the Bible? People often talk of God speaking to them in audible voices, inner voices, impressions, promptings, feelings. Why are there so many different views on this? What is the difference between general revelation and special revelation? Are there other revelations? What about personal words from God and 'prophecies'? What about impressions, promptings, inner voices? How does the Holy Spirit 'lead'?

General Revelation

General revelation is taught in Romans chapter 1: ***‘Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse’*** (vs.19,20). Creation and the revelation in nature screams out ‘there is a God!’. Even the complexities of the human body show a higher creator. Our blood vessels are intricately arranged and if laid out would travel a distance around the world in length. The information contained in a single DNA cell would fill 30 volumes of encyclopaedias. The amount of information in the DNA on a pinhead would fill a stack of books 500 times the distance from the earth to the moon. The molecules of DNA contain threads with codes with exacting reproducible information - even for such characteristics as hair shade and colour. The information is programmed with *a language with instructions* which copies - and each new cell knows which part to follow. The DNA cells are virtual cities in themselves! Creation screams out ‘there is a God!’

Special Revelation

The Bible testifies that God spoke particularly to individuals such as Abraham, Moses and Paul. This ‘specific revelation’ is stated in Hebrews chapter 1: ***‘God who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past unto the fathers by [in] the prophets, Has in these last days spoken unto us by [in] his Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds’*** (vs.1,2). Note the ‘*various times*’ - there were gaps in revelation, hundreds of years when *God did not speak*. Note the ‘*different ways*’ - first natural revelation as in Genesis; then the patriarchs; then the prophets in dreams, prophecies, visions, audible voices, tablets of stone and law; then the apostles; and *finally in Jesus Christ*. Note the phrase ‘*spoke in time past unto the fathers by [in] the prophets*’ - the tense here is literally ‘*having spoken*’ - it is past and done - no more revelation to ‘prophets’. Prophets were ones who prophesied - literally meaning to ‘speak forth the word of God’. Jesus is the final ‘prophet’ to speak God’s revelation. Note ‘*these last*

days spoken'. Commentators use the phrase 'last dispensation' to describe this as the 'church age' or 'Gospel age'. Note the phrase '*spoken unto us by [in] his Son*'. The words '*has spoken*' (Greek aorist indicative active) - is something that is *past* and done *once in time*.

Christ's Spirit guided certain '***holy men of God [who] spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost***' to write down the '***prophecy of the scripture***' (2Pet.1:19-21). The early church called this the 'canon' [rule] of scripture. It was written and settled in the 1st century and sealed in the 2nd. The Scriptures themselves are clear that God has spoken *finally* in and through this word.

Are there other ways that God speaks?

What about personal words/prophecies from God?

Some use examples in scripture where God spoke to people in differing ways, even audible voices. The problem with this is that these were rare instances and *written down* by God as *revelation to be fulfilled* in Jesus Christ (Heb.1:1,2), and not to be added to. If we accept new words from God today why are we not writing them down in the same way again and adding them to scripture? '***For I testify unto every man that hears the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book***' (Rev.22:18). The issue is *how* God has chosen to speak in time. In the Old Testament he spoke through mediators; but now there is only '*one mediator*' (1Tim.2:5). He chose to speak through the prophets for a limited time only - '*in time past*' (Heb.1:2). Examples of God speaking in audible words is now *past* and were also *rare*. Again, there were long periods when God did not speak at all in any way. From the time of Joseph through 80 years of Moses' life, there was nothing. Moses killed an Egyptian, fled and then there were 40 years with no record of God speaking. Yet today *often* people are supposedly hearing the voice of God and he is speaking to them apart from the Bible?

But how do we know for sure God has spoken to us in this way?...*There is no objective test!* Even if it lines up with the Bible this does not mean it was a voice from God - that can be counterfeited! How do we know it

is not someone else's voice; or our own imagination? Can we tell between the Lord's voice and a demon when *both speak truth*! Can we tell it is God and not 'an angel of light', a perfect counterfeit? If one answers yes, they have raised their egos to being divine and are prime candidates for deception! God does not speak by voices today but '*spoke in time past unto the fathers by [in] the prophets*' (Heb.1:1,2).

What about impressions/prompts/ inner voices...?

You hear a word/impression to sell your house and shift to another town. How do you test this? You cannot test this with scripture as there is no command to shift or not shift. I once had a friend who believed the Lord had shown him he was going to sell his house within so many days. But it did not sell in that time. What 'voice' did he hear? When he was challenged on this he had to admit *it was not God's voice*. But he was most disturbed when asked '*whose voice was it then?*'

One author addresses this issue: '*God guides through His Word and its principles. This is one of the most neglected dimensions of guidance today. It sounds terribly spiritual to say 'God led me', but I am always suspicious of a person who implies that he has a personal pipeline to God. When no one else senses that what the person suggests is the will of God, then we had better be careful. God has been blamed for the most outlandish things by people who have confused their own inverted pride with God's will. Occasionally I hear of a guy who, in the name of spiritual guidance, rushes up to a girl and says, 'Susie, God has told me you're to marry me'. I have news for him. If that is the will of God, then Susie is going to get the message too. If she does not, somebody's radar is jammed, and it's not hard to tell whose*' (1)

God, Satan, an angel, a demon, human emotions, hormonal imbalances, insomnia, medication, an upset stomach - all can cause a person to think that they have heard from God. Impressions, prompts, inner voices, etc *are not authoritative and cannot be tested objectively*.

Some claim to have heard from the Holy Spirit by ‘promptings’ and then when they see ‘fruit’ or ‘testimony’ that matches, then it is believed that this must have come from God speaking. But it must be understood that *Scripture never commands us to tune into any inner voice, prompting, impression.* We are simply commanded to study and meditate on Scripture (Josh.1:8; Ps.1:1-2). How do we know that inner voices and mental impressions are not the lies of a deceitful heart, imagination, or even demonic, even if it does not contradict scripture?

I once was in conversation with a man who was describing hearing God speak to him by impression/prompting that he could marry a certain person from a non Christian faith. After marriage the partner came to true faith in Christ. He stated this was ‘proof’ his original impression was of God. I challenged him as to why God would disobey His own word *at any time* in decreeing a marriage against His Word (2Cor.6). Can God do this even for pragmatic reasons? The scriptures answer: ***‘And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just’*** (Rom.3:8). What does it prove if ‘good’ things or ‘bad’ things happen as a result? Does that prove the voice was from God? Again - it is subjective. Newagers and occultists can do the same! Mormons teach that if you read the book of Mormon and you have a burning in the bosom it is then the word of God.

I once was in conversation with a Christian on the issue of ‘tongues’. I tried to show real ‘tongues’ were known foreign languages as in Acts 2. She quoted Romans 8:26 *‘...The Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered’*. She then added that the Spirit had convicted, impressed, showed her, that this was Holy Spirit ‘tongues’. I asked her - if it was ‘tongues’ spoken from the Spirit then why does the same Spirit say it is that which *‘cannot be uttered’*? The person was visibly checked before my next question - *‘where did your prompting/conviction come from’?*

Today people want the experiential. They want the promptings, impressions, inner voices from God the Holy Spirit. Yet the Bible gives NO encouragement to hear God in these ways and NO means to test such. These ways encourage the subjective heart, not the objective mind where true discernment is couched. ***‘He who trusts in his own heart is a fool’*** (Pr.28:26).

‘Scripture never commands us to tune into any inner voice. We’re commanded to study and meditate on Scripture (Josh.1:8; Ps.1:1-2). We’re instructed to cultivate wisdom and discernment (Pr.4:5-8). We’re told to walk wisely and make the most of our time (Eph.5:15-16). We’re ordered to be obedient to God’s commands (Deut.28:1-2; Jn.15:14). But we are never encouraged to listen for inner promptings. On the contrary, we are warned that our hearts are so deceitful and desperately wicked that we cannot understand them (Jer.17:9). Surely this should make us very reluctant to heed promptings and messages that arise from within ourselves. Those willing to heed inner voices and mental impressions may be listening to the lies of a deceitful heart, the fantasies of an overactive imagination, or even the voice of a demon. Once objective criteria are cast aside, there is no way to know the difference between truth and falsehood. Those who follow subjective impressions are by definition undiscerning’. (2)

How Does the Holy Spirit ‘Lead’?

The Holy Spirit certainly ‘leads’. ***‘Those who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God’*** (Rom.8:14). But this verse does not suggest we look to inner promptings from the Spirit for guidance. The context is about abstaining from ‘sin’ and the ‘flesh’. It ends with ***‘the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God’*** (vs.16). It is this *‘bearing witness’* that is a key phrase in understanding how the Holy Spirit ‘leads’.

The ‘Conscience’

The conscience is described as an inner witness; a self awareness. It is synonymous with the word ‘conviction’. It’s nature is to distinguish right from wrong with an inbuilt moral indicator which can also be a warning device. It ‘prompts’, persuades us to think or to do something. *People mistake this conscience for the actual voice of the Spirit.*

In John 8:9 Jesus finds a woman caught in adultery. He challenges any who had no sin to cast the first stone. ***‘And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one...’***. The conscience bears witness, speaks, gives confirmation. But it does this to a *limited extent* depending on the foundation of information fed to it. But the conscience is not the law or the voice, but a ‘witness’ to it. ***‘Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts... accusing or else excusing one another’*** (Rom.2:15).

The Conscience is not the light itself (Pr.6:23) but it is a skylight. It is an indicator of information fed to it. The conscience is not the Holy Spirit - but is a tool of such in conjunction with the Word of God. *What people call ‘promptings, impressions, inner voices’ of the Holy Spirit is not the Holy Spirit speaking, rather it’s their conscience! ‘I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost’* (Rom.9:1).

The Holy Spirit does not speak to us separate to the Word. He may ‘lead’ us through the conscience which is being ‘renewed in the mind’. Paul spoke of the importance of a good conscience: *‘...a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned’* (Acts 23:1; 1Tim.1:5). Any ‘inner peace’ also has much to do with the conscience: *‘For our rejoicing is this, the testimony [confirming] of our conscience...’* (2Cor.1:12).

How is it that one person can say they have a prompting/inner voice from the Spirit not to eat or drink this or that; or not to go here or there; yet other Christians can have the opposite ‘prompting’? Does the Spirit say one thing to one and the opposite to another? Some have a strong conscience and others a ‘weak’ conscience through *lack of knowledge* fed to it: *‘There is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled’* (1Cor.8:7).

Developing the conscience enables the Spirit to witness to it in a Godly fashion. The more we feed our conscience and understand the Law and the Word of God, the better the foundation for the conscience. The way that God ‘leads’ is through the conscience in shaping our lives with convictions, attitudes, judgments. This is not a matter of inward

promptings apart from the Word but of our consciences being fed and informed with the word of God as the Spirit directs.

God's 'leading' is also found in *God's providence* - the control of God in our lives. This leading is not seen till *after* the circumstances God brings to pass.

God's leading is found in the *will of God*. It is the will of God for us to be sanctified (1Thess.4:3; Rom.8:27-29); filled with the Spirit (Eph.5:17,18); to give thanks in all things (1Thess.5:18). It is the 'perfect will of God' for us to be '*transformed by the renewing of our mind*' - to prove that '*good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God*' (Rom.12:1,2).

Further concerns...

The increase of teaching and testimonies of the Holy Spirit speaking apart from the word of God raises some pastoral concerns. There is a dearth of solid Bible teaching today and the statistics of the poor Bible knowledge of today's Christians is alarming. The lack of faith in God's final revelation is not helped by the plethora of extra biblical means of hearing from God. '*The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables*' (2Tim.4:2-4).

I sometimes hear testimonies of God supposedly speaking to individual Christians in voices, promptings, impressions, etc. - when *new or young Christians are present*. The pastoral concern is for these young Christians to be grounded in the word of God and not distracted by subjective testimonies of promptings, impressions, inner voices, which can never be objectively tested and *are not THE 'word of God' which does sanctify* (Jn.17:17)!

Is God's word inspired, inerrant, closed, completed and final or not? Is it all sufficient and enough for us? We walk by faith; not by sight, feelings and impressions. The constant urge to have more than what we have already in the Word is not the choice of the Holy Spirit. *He points to the Word! 'Sanctify them through your truth: your word is truth'* (Jn.17:17). But sadly that is not enough today? Where does our daily

‘manna’ come from? Are we to be like the Israelites who had it supplied to them for 38 years until they rebelled and wanted more? So too, we live in an era that seeks after signs, visions, dreams, promptings, inner voices and impressions. Like the Israelites the issue at heart may well be pride and arrogance that *we do not accept what God has limited!* We simply do not need to know or tell what God is doing or saying apart from His infallible Word. ***‘Come now, you who say ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapour that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil’*** (James 4:13-16). Note ‘*if*’ the lord wills. We cannot presume to know for sure the Lord’s will in every situation and especially by promptings/inner voices/impressions. We become false prophets when we presume to hear from God other than the Word of God.

The call is to trust in the ***‘more sure word of God...the prophecy of the scriptures’*** (1Pet.1:19-21).

(1) <https://thinkpoint.wordpress.com/2007/05/26/do-inner-promptings-reveal-gods-will/>

(2) John F. MacArthur, Jr., *‘Reckless Faith’*, P.189-193.

About the Author and the Ministry

Terry Arnold holds a Doctorate in Theology (Dth), a Masters degree (MABS) and several diplomas. He was founder and president of *South Pacific Bible Institute*, a Bible college training and equipping people for ministry. In addition he was the founder of Hervey Bay Bible Church in Queensland, Australia. He has for 25 years served as an elder and then pastor.

Terry is the author of several books and is involved in a full time ministry of *teaching, informing* and *equipping* the church. He is also editor of a growing worldwide publication '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

His ministry includes preaching/teaching and conducting seminars and conferences in a wide range of churches and colleges.

TA Ministries is a non-denominational and non-profit faith ministry founded in 1989 when the book '*To Catholics Whom I Love*' was written by Terry Arnold. This book went through several re-prints and served as a fruitful outreach to Roman Catholics.

In 1996 the ministry became a full-time operation with the introduction of a free newsletter, later named '*Diakrisis (Australia)*'.

Diakrisis is published bi-monthly to *teach, inform* and *equip* the church of Biblical truths and to warn of false teaching. It has also been a valuable reference aid to hundreds of pastors/elders.