

His Instructions

Knowing Your Counselor:

John 14:16-17a, Acts 1:1-2

June 13, 2010

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Many people have difficulty believing God speaks to human beings. “Where is the evidence?” they demand, “Why haven’t I heard him?” The idea that God speaks is central to Christianity. The book of Hebrews opens:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2, NIV)

Although this may sound crazy, God does speak; and he expects us to hear his voice. In the ninth chapter of John, Jesus heals a man who was born blind. On a Sabbath, Jesus spits, makes a mud pack with the spit, applies it to the eyes (hopefully while they were closed), and tells the blind man to wash. The religious leaders see this as a religious and moral violation. They reject Jesus because he heals on the Sabbath. Jesus responds with an analogy. He says:

The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice. (John 10:2-5, NIV)

I have little experience with sheep. However, I’ve been around dogs and cats that are spooked by strangers and drawn to their masters. Jesus makes that point about sheep and their shepherd. He says that the sheep will follow the voice. They may not understand all the words,

but they'll follow the voice. They'll especially follow the voice when it carries tenderness and compassion. Jesus then says:

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me... I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice... (John 10:14-16, NIV)

The *other sheep*, of which Jesus spoke, were the Samaritan and Gentile people who came to put their faith in Jesus. The Samaritans and Gentile believers came to faith through the works of the Holy Spirit. They never met Jesus in body. They met Jesus in Spirit. The voice they listened to was that of the Holy Spirit, the Counselor. Last Sunday we discussed the voice of the Holy Spirit. Will Oliphant shared some of his experiences with that voice.

In John 14:16, Jesus promised us a Counselor, the Spirit of Truth. We are given a spiritual being, the Holy Spirit, to open our eyes to reality. In Acts 1, verses one and two, Luke tells us that Jesus gave his apostles instructions through the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit gave Jesus words for the apostles, specific words to direct them.

God's plan for people is not steer them like a car, but to instruct them like children through a Counselor, the Holy Spirit. Listen to this verse that came a thousand years before the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given:

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. (Psalm 32:8-9, NIV)

God intends his children to be taught, not driven. The devil drives people with fear, anger, pride and lust, but God instructs us and then lets us choose. God treats us with dignity as children who make informed choices. We are not treated as animals that must be controlled.

When our family first came to Bethany, we had a dog, a Springer spaniel, named Buddy. Buddy was stubborn. In obedience class, every other dog learned to heel. Every dog walked with a leash next to their master, except Buddy. At first, I was to use a choker chain, but it became clear that all a choker chain would do for Buddy is make him choke. Then we were sold a promise collar. I don't know why they named it a *promise collar*, except that you pay cash on the promise that you will be able to get your dog to walk beside you. The collar was a harness that fit over Buddy's face and nose and allowed me to turn his head with the leash. Thousands of times, I turned that dog's head, but up to the time of his death, Buddy never willingly walked beside me. If I let the leash go limp hoping he'd be a willing companion, he'd surge ahead.

At times, Buddy's relationship with me is a picture of my relationship with God. God wants me to be a willing companion, but without a taut leash I surge ahead seeking to achieve a vision that he wants us to pursue together. When I surge ahead, I mess up the timing, get in the way of others, actually hurt others, and feed my pride. God doesn't use a leash with us. He instructs us through the Holy Spirit. He offers us the dignity of being informed children of God... if we listen and obey.

How do we receive instructions from the Holy Spirit? How do we listen?

First, decide to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Believe that God loves you enough to speak. Believe the good news. Believe he has given you eternal life in his Son, Jesus. Believe Jesus paid for your sins. Believe God has raised him from the dead and he now reigns. Put in your lot with Jesus. Be baptized in his name; take refuge in him and his mercy. Invite Jesus by Spirit to come into your heart and teach you.

Second, read or listen to the Bible asking the Counselor, the Holy Spirit to teach you. In Hebrews 3:7, the author quotes Psalm 95, and writes:

So, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...” (Hebrews 3:7-8, NIV)

We learn from this verse not what the Holy Spirit said, but what the Holy Spirit says through what is written. The Holy Spirit speaks through the Scriptures. Indeed, through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit tells us to love, forgive, pray, worship, be patient, be generous, speak carefully, work hard, persevere, trust our Father, avoid bad company, and on and on. Through the Bible the Holy Spirit reveals much about the world, much about Jesus, and much about your life and purpose. It is vital that **“we value the Bible as God’s authoritative Word, study it together, and build our lives on its truth”** (Bethany Core Value #2). You will not be taught of God, you will not receive His Instructions if you ignore the Bible. The Holy Spirit counsels you through what is written.

Third, test rather than detest prophecy. Paul wrote the Corinthians to desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. He wrote the Thessalonians:

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, NIV)

Look for the Counselor to give you dreams, images, words and impressions. Look for the Counselor to bring you these expressions from others and then test them. When the Apostle Paul was traveling to Jerusalem, people met him along the way with images and words. One prophet took the Apostle’s belt, bound his own hands and feet with it, and told Paul and the church that the owner of this belt will experience this bondage in Jerusalem. The church tried to dissuade Paul from going, but the prophecy wasn’t meant to dissuade Paul. It was meant to mobilize prayer. Ask God what to do with the words, images and dreams you are given. I’ve seen people misinterpret prophecy and do dumb things to make it come true. I’ve seen them violate what the Holy Spirit taught in Scriptures to make a prophecy come true. One young woman divorced her

infertile husband, so that she would have the baby that was prophesied. That isn't faith. Those actions are fueled by unbelief and remind me of Abraham, Sarah and Ishmael, the baby Sarah got through her maid Hagar. That was an act of unbelief. However, more times than not, I see people dismiss prophecy that would bless them. Test what you are given. Don't detest it.

Fourth, honor and obey the authorities God gives you. The Holy Spirit works through parents, pastors, judges and civic officials. If you disregard or disrespect these people, you ignore the greatness of God and his ability to direct and counsel you. In the twenty-first chapter of Acts, the Apostle Paul presented himself to the spiritual authorities, the apostles and elders of Jerusalem. These amazing leaders had awesome spiritual gifts. They told Paul their counsel would lead to his acceptance, and he carried out their exact counsel; but instead of acceptance, he was beaten, nearly killed and taken captive. These leaders of the New Testament church had it wrong, but God used their instructions any way. Leaders may not always get it right, but trust God to use them.

Earlier this year, I believed God was calling me to help us this summer really hear the Counselor Jesus gives us, the Holy Spirit. Last week at the United Methodist annual conference in St. Cloud, our Minnesota bishop called us pastors and Minnesota churches to study the book of Acts this summer in order to hear the voice of the Counselor, the Holy Spirit. I believe God is putting this on your leaders' hearts because God wants you to really hear him now. It will make a real difference in a divided and stressed world.

If you aren't reading the book of Acts begin doing it. Next week I will announce four Sundays this summer that we will meet between services to examine the book of Acts, how we hear from the Counselor, and what we are hearing together from the Holy Spirit.

What an exciting journey! What a privilege it is to be taught by God!