Chapter One

A Paradox About Hearing God

There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it; yet I do not advise you to do it from that motive. It is not pleasure which we ought to seek in this exercise; but let us do it from a principle of love, and because God would have us.

BROTHER LAWRENCE, THE PRACTICE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Sunday dinner was finished, but we lingered round the table savoring the good food and reflecting on the morning’s service at church. The congregation—where I then served as a very young (and very green) assistant pastor—was excited about its plans for a new sanctuary to replace its old building, which was much loved but long overused and outgrown.

The morning message had focused on the plans for the new building. Our pastor spoke of his vision for the church’s increased ministry. He indicated how strongly he felt God’s guidance in the way the congregation was going, and he testified that God had spoken to him about things that should be done.

My wife’s grandmother, Mrs. Lucy Latimer (“Mema” to us all), seemed deep in thought as we continued to chatter along. Finally she said quietly, ”I wonder why God never speaks to me like that.”

This simple comment, which came like a bolt out of the blue from the heart of this woman of unshakable faith and complete devotion, forever changed my attitude toward glib talk about God’s speaking to us or about divine guidance. Through her words—in a way I came to understand only later—God spoke to me.

I was given a vivid realization, which has never left me, of the extent to which such talk places many sincere Christians on the outside, looking in. It is not necessarily that their experience is lacking, but they do not understand the language or how their experience works. This leaves them feeling confused and deficient and may lead them to play a game that they do not really understand and that rightly makes them very uncomfortable. It undermines their confidence that they are fully acceptable to God.

Mema, in fact, had a richly interactive life with God, as we all knew. But for whatever reasons, she had not been able to relate her experience of God’s presence in her life—of which she was completely certain—to the idea of God’s speaking with her. This left her at a loss for how to deal with the conversational side of her friendship with God.

Up to that point in my own experience I had rashly assumed that if you were really a Christian, then God spoke to you as a matter of course and you knew it. I was sure that he spoke individually and specifically about what he wanted each believer to do and that he also taught and made real on an individual basis the general truths all must believe in order to enter into life with him.

The Moving of God

Later I came to realize that this confidence was not based on genuine understanding. It came from my experiences of a series of revival meetings in which I was immersed as a young man. During those meetings I became accustomed to interacting with a characteristic type of thought and impulse, which was to me the moving of God upon my mind and heart. It was an experience clearly marked out for me and one that guided my actions, though I held no theory or doctrine about it.
Then as I subsequently grew into the Christian ministry, I learned to wait upon "the word of God" to come to me. In the most primary of senses the word of God is simply God's speaking. I also learned to expect his speaking to come through me to others. Experience taught me the remarkable difference between when it was "just me" talking, or even "just me" quoting and discussing Scripture, and when a certain something more was taking place.

Through their writings great Christians of the past such as John Calvin and William Law offered what we might call "the ministry of Eli" to me. (See the story in 1 Sam 3:8-9.) They gave me further insight into what was happening in my experiences and why it was happening. They helped me to identify and respond to experiences of God's speaking, just as Eli helped Samuel in the biblical story.

They also assured me that the same Spirit who delivered the Scriptures to holy men of old speaks today in the hearts of those who gather around the written Word to minister and be ministered to. And they warned me that only if this happened could I avoid being just another more or less clever letter-learned scribe—trying to nourish the souls of my hearers out of the contents of my own brain, giving them only what I was able to work up through my own efforts from the Bible or elsewhere.

It was not easy, however, for me to see that our most sacred experiences often blind us. The very light that makes it possible for us to see may also dazzle our eyes to the clearest of realities and make it impossible for us to see what lies in a shadow. Caught up in my own experiences of the workings of God's voice, I really did not understand it at all. I only knew its reality, and I thoughtlessly assumed it was a functioning, intelligible fact in every believer's life. Obviously I had a lot to learn.

So for a long while I was unable to appreciate the huge problems that the very idea of God's speaking to us created for some of the most faithful adherents of the church—not to mention those entirely outside it. When someone seemed to have difficulty with hearing God, I simply passed it off as a sign of weakness of faith or even rebellion on their part. Yet I could not entirely avoid an awareness that many of the most faithful and devout Christians can make no sense of what is called "divine guidance"—except possibly as it comes in the form of outright necessities imposed by force of circumstances.

I saw them driven to turn all guidance into blind force and to treat God's will as nothing but fate. And I was distressed at how often people identified some brutal event as God's will—even when it clearly came from a decision made by human beings. They then easily moved on to the faith-destroying, even blasphemous idea that everything that happens in this world is caused by God.

The Ongoing Conversation

Today I continue to believe that people are meant to live in an ongoing conversation with God, speaking and being spoken to. Rightly understood I believe that this can be abundantly verified in experience. God's visits to Adam and Eve in the Garden, Enoch's walks with God and the face-to-face conversations between Moses and Jehovah are all commonly regarded as highly exceptional moments in the religious history of humankind. Aside from their obviously unique historical role, however, they are not meant to be exceptional at all. Rather they are examples of the normal human life God intended for us: God's indwelling his people through personal presence and fellowship. Given who we are by basic nature, we live—really live—only through God's regular speaking in our souls and thus "by every word that comes from of the mouth of God."

During the time spent writing this book, I made a special point of drawing others out in conversation concerning their experiences of hearing God. When a spirit of acceptance is established, and it is clear that the topic is to be dealt with seriously, then the stories begin to flow. And as understanding and confidence grow, other cases come to mind that are seen to be or to contain a word from God to the individual. Many might be surprised to discover what a high percentage of serious Christians—and even non-Christians—can tell of specific experiences in which they are sure God spoke to them.
Of course talking to God is an almost universal practice. The words "Talking to God: An Intimate Look at the Way We Pray" covered the front of Newsweek's issue for January 6, 1992. The main article was devoted to some sociological studies of the practice of prayer recently undertaken in the United States. "This week" the article said, "... more of us will pray than will go to work, or exercise, or have sexual relations.... 78 percent of all Americans pray at least once a week; more than half (57 percent) report praying at least once a day.... Even among the 13 percent of Americans who are atheists or agnostics, nearly one in five still prays daily."

As these studies also found, it is widely recognized that a major part of prayer is listening to God and letting God direct us. But those who experience a directing word from God rarely speak about it. Often they have never spoken of it at all, even to their closest friends.

**The UFO Syndrome**

Is it not with good reason that we hesitate to speak about experiences we regard as God's speaking to us? Similarly those who think they have sighted a UFO or those who have had the near-death experiences much discussed in recent years soon learn to keep their mouths shut. They know that they may single themselves out for unwanted attention if they are not very careful.

Perhaps they will be regarded as eccentric or even crazy. And since those experiences really are strange and very hard to interpret, these people genuinely fear being misguided. They do not wish to go public with something that might just be a mistake on their part. They also fear being thought of as arrogant, as taking themselves to be special or, to borrow language the apostle Paul used about his own experiences, as being "too elated by the abundance of revelations" (2 Cor 12:7 RSV).

Similar doubts and hesitations justifiably trouble those who feel they are spoken to by God. "Why is it," comedian Lily Tomlin asks, "that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?" Such a response, from ourselves or others, to someone's claim to have heard from God is especially likely today just because of the lack of specific teaching and pastoral guidance on such matters. Indeed like the Sadducees of old, many church leaders discourage the very thought that God would speak to the individual. And some leaders obviously prefer that he speak only to them and not to their flock. After all, it is well known that people go off into all sorts of errors and become quite unmanageable once God starts "talking" to them.

**Our Leaders Hear from God**

Faced with such inner fears and such a lack of teaching—or even with explicit denial or discouragement—disciples of Christ today may be somewhat encouraged by another message that emanates from their fellowships. For we are also constantly confronted with suggestions or implications that ideally we should be engaged in communications with God just like our leaders.

Certainly our Christian leaders commonly indicate that God has spoken to them. And precisely because they are our leaders, there is a strong suggestion that we should strive to be like them. Here are a few random cases.

In a television interview on January 31, 1983, Dr. Ken Taylor, who produced the widely used version of the Scriptures known as *The Living Bible*, told how he had been concerned about children having a Bible that they could easily understand. According to his statement, one afternoon "God revealed" to him "the idea of a thought-for-thought translation instead of word-for-word." This idea worked so well that such versions have now been published in many languages around the world.
there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do; then, oh! then I heard a voice which said, "there is one, even Jesus Christ, that can speak to thy condition"; and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory.

In book eight of his Confessions St. Augustine, who lived from A.D. 354-430, tells how in a similarly distraught condition he "heard from a neighboring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, 'Take up and read. Take up and read.'" He could remember no child's game with these words. "So, checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God, to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find." Thus he came upon Romans 13:13-14. His condition was immediately transformed, as was Fox's centuries later, and one of the greatest and most influential of all Christians entered the kingdom of the heavens.

Quite characteristically a weekly publication from a large local church states that the minister "has been given a bold vision by our Lord." The vision is that every person in the entire geographical area where the church is located should be called to Christ in a one-year period by a telephone call from some person in the church. Notice this is not described as a bright idea that struck the minister but as a vision communicated to him by God. And of course that makes all the difference in the world in its meaning for the congregation that the minister leads.

I cite these cases here not because they are exceptional, but precisely because they are so common. There is a practically endless supply of such stories. They vary in detail as we move from one denominational tradition to another, but to some significant degree they are present in all Christian communions, except those that have moved beyond theological liberalism into simple humanism.

Should we expect anything else, given the words of the scriptural record and the heritage of the Christian church? As Christians we stand in a millennia-long tradition of humans who have been addressed by God. The ancient Israelites heard the voice of their God speaking to them out of the midst of fire (Deut 4:33). A regular place of communion and conversational interchange between the high priest and God was established in the mercy seat over the ark of God (Ex 25:22; see also Lk 1:11-21).

But the individual with faith among the Israelites also cried out expectantly to be taught by God: "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path" (Ps 143:10). Israel's experience led the prophet Isaiah—who also had firsthand experience of conversing with God (Is 6)—to describe conditions of the faithful this way: "Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.... The Lord will guide you continually" (Is 58:9, 11).

Abiding Includes Conversing

On the evening before his crucifixion Jesus assured his little band of followers that although he was leaving them, he would continue to manifest himself to all who loved him. Judas who was also called Thaddaeus (not Judas Iscariot) then asked just the right question: How would this manifesting take place (Jn 14:22)? Jesus' reply was that he and his Father would "come to them and make our home with them" (14:23).