

A review of Dallas Willard's book:

Hearing God, Developing a Conversational Relationship With God

Hearing God was previously published by Regal (1984), then by Harper (1993), and finally InterVarsity (1999) under the title of *In Search of Guidance*. This updated and expanded edition is published under the *Formatio* wing of InterVarsity Press, which offers numerous books promoting “spiritual formation” and “Christian” mysticism. *At the heart of both spiritual formation and mysticism is God speaking beyond the pages of Scripture*. For this reason *Hearing God* is an important book, written by one of the premiere leaders within the movement. That Willard is merely updating the same message he delivered nearly 30 years ago shows that the spiritual formation movement has not changed its basic teachings.

And what are they? In essence, that we can live “the kind of life where hearing God is not an uncommon occurrence” (p. 12), for “hearing God is but one dimension of a richly interactive relationship and obtaining guidance is but one facet of hearing God” (p. 13). In other words, the maturing Christian should expect to hear the voice of God, independent from Scripture, on a regular basis and that voice will reveal God’s individual, specific will for his life. Such individual communication from the Lord, we are told, is absolutely essential because without it there can be no personal walk with God (pp. 26, 31, 67). And it is those who are hearing from God today who will redefine “Christian spirituality for our time” (p. 15).

This premise leads to a very practical problem, however, one Willard will address throughout the book in many ways. The problem is how does one know that he has really heard from God? Could he not be confusing his own thoughts, or even implanted thoughts from Satan (pp. 235-237), with the voice of God?

This is even more problematic because Willard believes that while God can speak audibly or use dreams and visions, normally His voice will come as a “still small voice” heard only within our own hearts and minds. In fact, so vital is this “still small voice” that the author devotes his largest chapter to exploring what it means (chapter 5, pp. 114-153). Yet in all of his discussion on the topic, it never seems to dawn on Willard that the original

“still small voice” to Elijah ([1 Kings 19:12-18](#)) was in fact an audible voice, *not an inward impression or thought*.

Since Willard believes that God normally speaks to us through an inner, inaudible, subjective voice (p. 130) and that it is possible that God is speaking and we do not even know it (pp. 118-120), how can we be certain when God is speaking to us? \

In answer, Willard boldly informs us that we can only learn the voice of God through experience (pp. 9, 19, 21, 63, 143). He clearly states, “The only answer to the question, how do we know whether this is from God? is By experience” (p. 218) (emphasis his).

The author will use the word “experience” over 130 times, and equivalents hundreds of times more. The mechanics of learning the voice of God is detailed on pages 217-251, but ultimately it all boils down to experience. And until we have “the experience” it will apparently be necessary for those who have themselves supposedly heard from God to guide us. Without such help we may not be able to detect the voice of God (p. 221).

Never mind that the Scriptures never tells us how, nor supplies techniques, to know when God is speaking, nor does the Bible ever tell us that we need to learn the voice of God. This is all pure fabrication on Willard’s part. As a matter of fact every time God speaks in Scripture it is through an audible voice, never through an inner voice, impressions or feelings, and that includes Elijah’s still small voice.

Willard is advocating a form of communication from God never found in the pages of Scripture; he then elevates this inner voice to the very essence of our relationship with God. He attempts to prove this not only through his own experience but also by the examples of others such as Ken Taylor, George Fox, Teresa of Avila, St. Francis, Henri Nouwen and many others (see pp. 23-27).

Willard attempts to intimidate his readers as well by telling them that God’s communication in this way to early Christians was a normal experience (pp. 70, 119) (which it wasn’t), that if we are not hearing from God it may be that we are out of tune with Him (p. 90), and that the Bible and the church are inadequate for developing a personal relationship with God (pp. 140, 186).

Willard teaches many theological errors as well. For example, as might be expected, the author has a low view of Scripture. He believes the Bible is God's inspired written word given to "provide us with a general understanding of God to inspire and cultivate a corresponding faith" (p. 87). But if we want to find out what God is saying to us personally we must go beyond the Bible (p. 218).

Further Willard warns us of what he calls "Bible deism," which is the view that God communicates to us today through Scripture alone (p. 142). As a matter of fact the Bible may prove a deadly snare: "We can even destroy ourselves by Bible study; specifically, by the study of Paul's epistles" (p. 187). And even if the Bible is inerrant in the original texts it "does not guarantee sane and sound, much less error-free, interpretations" (p. 185). Willard clearly has a postmodern understanding of Scripture (i.e. it can never be rightly understood apart from God's present-day communications) (p. 185).

In conjunction with this view of Scripture is the idea (wrongly drawn from [Luke 17:7-10](#)) that an obsession to obey God "may be the very thing that rules out being the kind of person that He calls us to be" (p. 14).

Willard teaches a number of other deviate ideas including:

- God plans His life around us (p. 47).
- We become the royal priesthood of God when we have learned to hear from God (pp. 69-71).
- Similarly, we become the temple of God through the same means (p. 76).
- As well, we do not start the Christian life as the slave of God, we become His slave in time through a maturing process (p. 77).
- Based on [Colossians 1:19-29](#) he believes the resolution of the world's problems, although finalized at Christ's return, begins now (p. 75).
- The gospel is not reconciliation to God by faith but, "The good news that the kingdom rule of God is available to humankind here and now" (p. 202, cf. pp. 203-204).

In order to learn to hear the subjective voice of God, Willard recommends the use of *lectio divina*, which is custom-made for this imaginative endeavor. As a result a co-writer provides six *lectio* exercises to pave the way (pp. 48-51, 104-105, 132-133, 165-166, 208-209, 247-250). The ultimate goal in all of this is to have the mind of Christ (pp. 71-72) which means to Willard that “we understand what God is doing so well that we often know exactly what God is thinking and intending to do” (p. 71).

(See the webpage “Contemplative Prayer” Heresy, for a fuller description of the *lectio divina* heresy.)

The danger of Willard’s imaginative teachings on hearing from God through an inner voice can hardly be exaggerated. Rather than turning people to the inspired authoritative Scriptures for God’s word today, Willard turns us toward the subjective, unreliable self. The result is a people who believe they have heard from God, even as they turn away from the Word of God itself.