

“InterVarsity Press is doing a very good thing by bringing John Stott’s *The Contemporary Christian* back into print—slightly modernized, helpfully rearranged, and broken into short, reader-friendly books. The result is a boon to a new generation of readers who will greatly benefit, as many have before, from Stott’s thorough grounding in Scripture, unusual help for living the Christian life, and perceptive interaction with the contemporary world.”

Mark Noll, author of *The Rise of Evangelicalism*

“I have long benefited from the work of John Stott because of the way he combines rigorous engagement of the biblical text and careful engagement with the culture of his day. The God’s Word for Today series presents Stott at his very best. This series displays his commitment to biblical authority, his zeal for the mission of the church, and his call to faithful witness in the world. Stott’s reflections here are a must-read for church leaders today.”

Trevin Wax, director of Bibles and reference at LifeWay Christian Resources, author of *This Is Our Time* and *Eschatological Discipleship*

“Imagine being a child overwhelmed by hundreds of jigsaw puzzle pieces—you just can’t put them together! And then imagine a kindly old uncle comes along and helps you put the whole thing together piece by piece. That is what it felt like reading John Stott’s *The Contemporary Christian*. For those of us who feel we can’t get our head around our Bible, let alone our world, he comes along and, with his staggering gifts of clarity and insight, helps us step by step to work out what it means to understand our world through biblical lenses. It’s then a great blessing to have Tim Chester’s questions at the end of each chapter, which help us think through and internalize each step.”

Rico Tice, senior minister for evangelism, All Souls Langham Place, London, coauthor of *Christianity Explored*

“Vintage Stott, with all that that implies. In it, as usual, we find him digesting and deploying a wide range of material with a symmetry matching that of Mozart, a didactic force like that of J. C. Ryle, and a down-to-earth common sense that reminds us of G. K. Chesterton. It is really a pastoral essay, a sermon on paper aimed at changing people . . . an outstandingly good book.”

J. I. Packer, in *Christianity Today*

“In my formative years as a young Christian, I was acutely aware of the fact that I faced many challenges to Christian thinking and behavior. Few writers helped me understand how I should respond to these challenges and think and live as a Christian as much as John Stott did. The challenges of faithfulness to God’s way are more acute and complex today than when I was a young Christian. In these little books you find the essence of Stott’s thinking about the Christian life, and it is refreshing to read again and see how relevant and health giving this material is for today. I’m grateful to InterVarsity Press and to Tim Chester for making Stott’s thinking accessible to a new generation.”

Ajith Fernando, teaching director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka

“It is always refreshing, enlightening, and challenging reading from the pen of John Stott. I am totally delighted that one of his most significant works will continue to be available, hopefully for more decades to come. The way Stott strives to be faithful to the Word of God and relevant to his world—secularized Western society—as the locus for the drama of God’s action is exemplary, especially for those of us ordained to the service of the church in our diverse contexts. I highly commend the God’s Word for Today series to all who share the same pursuit—listening intently to God’s Word and God’s world, hearing and obeying God.”

David Zac Niringiye, author of *The Church: God’s Pilgrim People*

“I am delighted that a new generation will now be able to benefit from this rich teaching, which so helped me when it first appeared. As always with John Stott, there is a wonderful blend of faithful exposition of the Bible, rigorous engagement with the world, and challenging applications for our lives.”

Vaughan Roberts, author of *God’s Big Picture*

“Technology has enabled more voices to clamor for our attention than ever before; while at the same time, people’s ability to listen carefully seems to have deteriorated like never before. John Stott’s speaking and writing was renowned for two things in particular. He taught us how to listen attentively to God in order to live faithfully for God, and he too modeled how to listen to the world sensitively in order to communicate God’s purposes intelligibly. He taught us to listen. That is why it is such a thrill to see *The Contemporary Christian* carefully revived in a new format as this series for a new generation of readers. As we read, may we listen well!”

Mark Meynell, director (Europe and Caribbean) of Langham Preaching, Langham Partnership, author of *When Darkness Seems My Closest Friend*

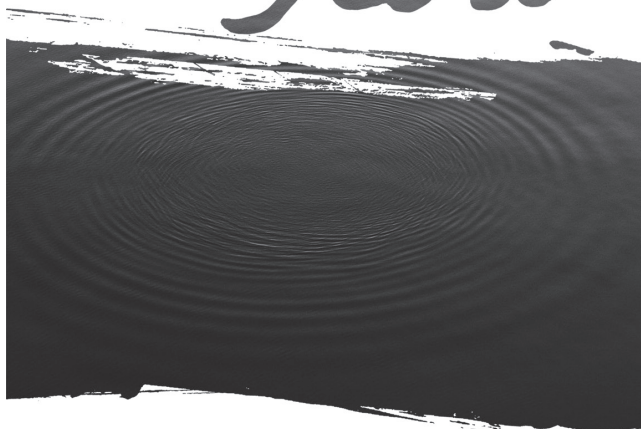
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with
TIM CHESTER

John Stott



The Disciple

GOD'S WORD FOR TODAY



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Preface

To be 'contemporary' is to live in the present, and to move with the times, without worrying too much about the past or the future.

To be a 'contemporary Christian', however, is to live in a present that is enriched by our knowledge of the past and by our expectation of the future. Our Christian faith demands this. Why? Because the God we trust and worship is 'the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty',¹ while the Jesus Christ we follow is 'the same yesterday and today and for ever'.²

So this book and series are about how Christians handle time – how we can bring the past, the present and the future together in our thinking and living. Two main challenges face us. The first is the tension between the 'then' (past) and the 'now' (present), and the second the tension between the 'now' (present) and the 'not yet' (future).

The Introduction opens up the first problem. Is it possible for us truly to honour the past and live in the present at the same time? Can we preserve Christianity's historic identity intact, without cutting ourselves off from those around us? Can we communicate the gospel in ways that are exciting and modern, without distorting or even destroying it? Can we be authentic and fresh at the same time, or do we have to choose?

The Conclusion opens up the second problem: the tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet'. How far can we explore and experience everything that God has said and done through Christ, without straying into what has not yet been revealed or given? How can we develop a proper sense of humility about a future yet to unfold, without becoming complacent about where we are in the present?

In between these enquiries into the influences of the past and the future comes an exploration about our Christian responsibilities in the present.

Preface

This series is about questions of doctrine and discipleship under the five headings: 'The Gospel', 'The Disciple' (the book you are holding in your hands), 'The Bible', 'The Church' and 'The World', though I make no attempt to be systematic, let alone exhaustive.

In addition to the topic of time, and the relations between past, present and future, there is a second theme running through this series: the need for us to talk less and listen more.

I believe we are called to the difficult and even painful task of 'double listening'. We are to listen carefully (although of course with differing degrees of respect) both to the ancient Word and to the modern world, in order to relate the one to the other with a combination of faithfulness and sensitivity.

Each book in this series is an attempt at double listening. It is my firm conviction that, if we can only develop our capacity for double listening, we will avoid the opposite pitfalls of unfaithfulness and irrelevance, and truly be able to speak God's Word to God's world with effectiveness today.

Adapted from the original Preface by John Stott in 1991

A note to the reader

The original book entitled *The Contemporary Christian*, on which this volume and series are based, may not seem ‘contemporary’ to readers more than a quarter of a century later. But both the publisher and John Stott’s Literary Executors are convinced that the issues which John Stott addresses in this book are every bit as relevant today as when they were first written.

The question was how to make this seminal work accessible for new generations of readers. We have sought to do this in the following ways:

- The original work has been divided into a series of several smaller volumes based on the five major sections of the original.
- Words that may not resonate with the twenty-first-century reader have been updated, while great care has been taken to maintain the thought process and style of the author in the original.
- Each chapter is now followed by questions from a current bestselling Christian author to aid reflection and response.

Lovers of the original work have expressed delight that this book is being made available in a way that extends its reach and influence well into a new century. We pray that your life will be enriched as you read, as the lives of many have already been greatly enriched by the original edition.

Series introduction

The Contemporary Christian: the then and the now

The expression ‘the contemporary Christian’ strikes many as a contradiction in terms. Isn’t Christianity an antique relic from the remote past, irrelevant to people in today’s world?

My purpose in this series is to show that there is such a thing as ‘contemporary Christianity’ – not something newfangled, but original, historic, orthodox, biblical Christianity sensitively related to the modern world.

Christianity: both historical and contemporary

We begin by reaffirming that Christianity is a historical religion. Of course, every religion arose in a particular historical context. Christianity, however, makes an especially strong claim to be historical because it rests not only on a historical *person*, Jesus of Nazareth, but on certain historical *events* which involved him, especially his birth, death and resurrection. There is a common thread here with the Judaism from which Christianity sprang. The Old Testament presents God not only as ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’, but also as the God of the covenant that he made with Abraham, and then renewed with Isaac and Jacob. Again, he is not only ‘the God of Moses’, but is also seen as the Redeemer responsible for the exodus, who went on to renew the covenant yet again at Mount Sinai.

Christians are forever tethered in heart and mind to these decisive, historical events of the past. We are constantly encouraged in the

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Bible to look back to them with thankfulness. Indeed, God deliberately made provision for his people to recall his saving actions on a regular basis. Supremely, the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion enables us to call the atoning death of Christ regularly to mind and so bring the past into the present.

But the problem is that Christianity's foundational events took place such a long time ago. I had a conversation with two brothers some years ago – students who told me they had turned away from the faith of their parents. One was now an agnostic, the other an atheist. I asked why. Did they no longer believe in the truth of Christianity? No, their dilemma was not whether Christianity was *true*, but whether it was *relevant*. How could it be? Christianity, they went on, was a primitive, Palestinian religion from long ago. So what on earth did it have to offer them, living in the exciting, modern world?

This view of Christianity is widespread. The world has changed dramatically since Jesus' day, and goes on changing with ever more bewildering speed. People reject the gospel, not necessarily because they think it false, but because it no longer resonates with them.

In response to this we need to be clear about the basic Christian conviction that God continues to speak through what he has spoken. His Word is not a prehistoric fossil, but a living message for the contemporary world. Even granted the historical particularities of the Bible and the immense complexities of the modern world, there is still a fundamental correspondence between them. God's Word remains a lamp to our feet and a light for our path.¹

At the same time, our dilemma remains. Can Christianity both retain its authentic identity *and* demonstrate its relevance?

The desire to present Jesus in a way that appeals to our own generation is obviously right. This was the preoccupation of the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer while in prison during World War 2: 'What is bothering me incessantly,' he wrote, 'is the question . . . who

Christ really is for us today?² It is a difficult question. In answering it, the church has tended in every generation to develop images of Christ which deviate from the portrait painted by the New Testament authors.

Attempting to modernize Jesus

Here are some of the church's many attempts to present a contemporary picture of Christ, some of which have been more successful than others in remaining loyal to the original.

I think first of *Jesus the ascetic*, who inspired generations of monks and hermits. He was much like John the Baptist, for he too dressed in a camel's hair cloak, wore sandals or went barefoot, and munched locusts with evident relish. But it would be hard to reconcile this portrait with his contemporaries' criticism that he was a party-goer who 'came eating and drinking'.³

Then there was *Jesus the pale Galilean*. The apostate emperor Julian tried to reinstate Rome's pagan gods after Constantine had replaced them with the worship of Christ, and is reported as having said on his deathbed in AD 363, 'You have conquered, O Galilean.' His words were popularized by the nineteenth-century poet Swinburne:

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean;
The world has grown grey from thy breath.

This image of Jesus was perpetuated in medieval art and stained glass, with a heavenly halo and a colourless complexion, eyes lifted to the sky and feet never quite touching the ground.

In contrast to the presentations of Jesus as weak, suffering and defeated, there was *Jesus the cosmic Christ*, much loved by the Byzantine church leaders. They depicted him as the King of kings and Lord of lords, the creator and ruler of the universe. Yet, exalted high above all things, glorified and reigning, he seemed aloof from

the real world, and even from his own humanity, as revealed in the incarnation and the cross.

At the opposite end of the theological spectrum, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists of the Enlightenment constructed in their own image *Jesus the teacher of common sense*,⁴ entirely human and not divine at all. The most dramatic example is the work of Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States from 1801 to 1809. Rejecting the supernatural as incompatible with reason, he produced his own edition of the Gospels, in which all miracles and mysteries were systematically eliminated. What is left is a guide to a merely human moral teacher.

In the twentieth century we were presented with a wide range of options. Two of the best known owe their popularity to musicals. There is *Jesus the clown of Godspell*, who spends his time singing and dancing, and thus captures something of the gaiety of Jesus, but hardly takes his mission seriously. Somewhat similar is *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the disillusioned celebrity, who once thought he knew who he was, but in Gethsemane was no longer sure.

The late President of Cuba, Fidel Castro, frequently referred to Jesus as ‘a great revolutionary’, and there have been many attempts to portray him as *Jesus the freedom fighter*, the urban guerrilla, the first-century Che Guevara, with black beard and flashing eyes, whose most characteristic gesture was to overthrow the tables of the moneychangers and to drive them out of the temple with a whip.

These different portraits illustrate the recurring tendency to update Christ in line with current fashions. It began in the apostolic age, with Paul needing to warn of false teachers who were preaching ‘a Jesus other than the Jesus we [apostles] preached’.⁵ Each succeeding generation tends to read back into him its own ideas and hopes, and create him in its own image.

Their motive is right (to paint a contemporary portrait of Jesus), but the result is always distorted (as the portrait is unauthentic). The

challenge before us is to present Jesus to our generation in ways that are both accurate and appealing.

Calling for double listening

The main reason for every betrayal of the authentic Jesus is that we pay too much attention to contemporary trends and too little to God's Word. The thirst for relevance becomes so demanding that we feel we have to give in to it, whatever the cost. We become slaves to the latest fad, prepared to sacrifice truth on the altar of modernity. The quest for relevance degenerates into a lust for popularity. For the opposite extreme to irrelevance is accommodation, a feeble-minded, unprincipled surrender to the spirit of the time.

God's people live in a world which can be actively hostile. We are constantly exposed to the pressure to conform.

Thank God, however, that there have always been those who have stood firm, sometimes alone, and refused to compromise. I think of Jeremiah in the sixth century BC, and Paul in his day ('everyone . . . has deserted me'),⁶ Athanasius in the fourth century and Luther in the sixteenth.

In our own day, we too need to resolve to present the biblical gospel in such a way as to speak to modern dilemmas, fears and frustrations, but with equal determination not to compromise it in so doing. Some stumbling-blocks are intrinsic to the original gospel and cannot be eliminated or soft-pedalled in order to make it easier to accept. The gospel contains some features so alien to modern thought that it will always appear foolish, however hard we strive to show that it is 'true and reasonable'.⁷ The cross will always be an assault on human self-righteousness and a challenge to human self-indulgence. Its 'scandal' (stumbling-block) simply cannot be removed. The church speaks most authentically not when it has become indistinguishable from the world around us, but when its distinctive light shines most brightly.

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However keen we are to communicate God's Word to others, we must be faithful to that Word and, if necessary, be prepared to suffer for it. God's word to Ezekiel encourages us: 'Do not be afraid of them . . . You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious.'⁸ Our calling is to be faithful and relevant, not merely trendy.

How, then, can we develop a Christian mind which is both shaped by the truths of historic, biblical Christianity and also fully immersed in the realities of the contemporary world? We have to begin with a double refusal. We refuse to become either so absorbed in the Word that we *escape* into it and fail to let it confront the world, or so absorbed in the world that we *conform* to it and fail to subject it to the judgment of the Word.

In place of this double refusal, we are called to double listening. We need to listen to the Word of God with expectancy and humility, ready for God perhaps to confront us with a word that may be disturbing and uninvited. And we must also listen to the world around us. The voices we hear may take the form of shrill and strident protest. There will also be the anguished cries of those who are suffering, and the pain, doubt, anger, alienation and even despair of those who are at odds with God. We listen to the Word with humble reverence, anxious to understand it, and resolved to believe and obey what we come to understand. We listen to the world with critical alertness, anxious to understand it too, and resolved not necessarily to believe and obey it, but to sympathize with it and to seek grace to discover how the gospel relates to it.

Everybody finds listening difficult. But are Christians sometimes less good at listening than others? We can learn from the so-called 'comforters' in the Old Testament book of Job. They began well. When they heard about Job's troubles, they came to visit him and, seeing how great his sufferings were, said nothing to him for a whole week. If only they had continued as they began, and kept their mouths shut! Instead, they trotted out their conventional

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view – that every sinner suffers for his own sins – in the most insensitive way. They did not really listen to what Job had to say. They merely repeated their own thoughtless and heartless claptrap, until in the end God stepped in and rebuked them for having misrepresented him.

We need to cultivate ‘double listening’, the ability to listen to two voices at the same time – the voice of God through the Bible and the voices of men and women around us. These voices will often contradict one another, but our purpose in listening to them both is to discover how they relate to each other. Double listening is indispensable to Christian discipleship and to Christian mission.

It is only through this discipline of double listening that it is possible to become a ‘contemporary Christian’. We bring ‘historical’ and ‘contemporary’ together as we learn to apply the Word to the world, proclaiming good news that is both true and new.

To put it in a nutshell, we live in the ‘now’ in the light of the ‘then’.

The Disciple

Introduction

Christian discipleship (that is, following Christ) is a many-faceted responsibility. The four aspects I have chosen could appear somewhat random, but all of them tend to be underrated or even overlooked.

I begin with ‘The listening ear’. For, although all our bodily organs are to be consecrated to God (including our eyes and lips, our hands and feet), a good case can be made for seeing our ears as the most important. Every true disciple is a listener, as we began to see in the Series introduction.

Chapter 2 (‘Mind and emotions’) recalls that our Creator has made us both rational and emotional persons, and then it explores some of the more significant links between these two features of the human personality.

In chapter 3, under the title ‘Guidance, vocation and ministry’, we discover that discipleship implies service, and consider how we can discern the will of God and the call of God in our lives.

For the final chapter is reserved a discussion of the first fruit of the Spirit, which is love. Its primacy in Christian disciples is well expressed in the Book of Common Prayer, which describes it as ‘that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted dead before God’.

1

The listening ear

We've already noted that one of the most important – and much-neglected – ingredients of Christian discipleship is the cultivation of a listening ear. Bad listeners do not make good disciples.

The apostle James was clear about this. His warnings that the tongue is 'a restless evil, full of deadly poison'¹ are well known, but he has no comparable criticism of the ear. He urges us not to talk too much, but seems to suggest that we can never listen too much. Here is his exhortation: 'My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.'²

What a remarkable organ God has created in the form of the human ear! Of course, what we usually call the ear is only the *outer ear*, that fleshy projection on the side of the head which comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. From it a two-centimetre canal leads to the eardrum, behind which is the *middle ear*. Here the body's three tiniest bones (popularly known as the anvil, the hammer and the stirrup) amplify sound twenty-two times and pass it on to the *inner ear*, where the real hearing takes place. Its main component is the snail-shaped tube named the cochlea. It contains thousands of microscopic, hair-like cells, each of which is tuned to one particular vibration. The vibrations are now converted into electric impulses, which convey sound to the brain for decoding along 30,000 circuits of the auditory nerve, enough for a sizeable city's telephone service. The human ear has rightly been celebrated as 'a triumph of miniaturization'.³

When you think how versatile and sensitive this organ is, it is a great pity that we do not put it to better use and develop our capacity

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for listening. I am thinking not only of music, birdsong and animal calls, but also of the value of conversation for our relationships. Involuntary deafness is a grievous disability; deliberate deafness is both a sin and a folly.

This is one of the main themes of Alan Parker's film *Birdy*, which is based on William Wharton's novel. Its key statement is the throwaway line near the end that 'nobody listens to anybody any longer'. The film depicts the friendship of two adolescent boys in Philadelphia, Al and Birdy, which blossoms in spite of Birdy's weird obsession with bird flight. Drafted to Vietnam, they are both blown up. Al has to have surgery on his disfigured face, while Birdy is damaged psychologically. He retreats into impenetrable silence, and is committed to a mental hospital. He cowers in his cell like a caged bird, constantly looking up at the barred window, dreaming of escape. The two men urgently need each other's support in the cruel aftermath of war, but they cannot communicate. At last, however, the breakthrough takes place, and their friendship is restored. But the background to it is a hostile world in which people are out of touch with each other – an unsympathetic mother, an uncomprehending girlfriend, a bloody and senseless war, and a psychotherapist who lacks insight and compassion. Al and Birdy are now listening to each other again, but they seem to be the exceptions in a world in which 'nobody listens to anybody any longer'.

James's appeal to us to be 'quick to listen' is not one we find easy to follow. Many of us are compulsive talkers, especially preachers! We prefer to talk than listen, to volunteer information than confess our ignorance, to criticize than receive criticism. But who am I to be saying these things? I myself have been as great an offender in this area as anybody. Here's an example. It might seem a small incident, but it has proved to be formative for me. It was Monday morning in London, the All Souls church staff team had gathered for our weekly meeting, and I was in the chair. The others were carrying on about something which did not particularly interest me (I now forget what

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it was), and I am ashamed to say that I had switched off. Suddenly Ted Schroder, who might not unfairly be described at that time as 'a brash young colonial from New Zealand', and who is now a close and valued friend, blurted out, 'John, you're not listening!' I blushed. For he was quite right, and it is intolerably rude not to listen when somebody is speaking. Moreover, the tensions that were surfacing in our staff team at that time were largely due to my failure to listen. So I repented, and have many times since prayed for grace to be a better listener.

To whom, then, shall we listen? First and foremost to God.

Listening to God

One of the distinctive truths about the God of the Bible is that he is a speaking God. Unlike lifeless idols which are dumb, the living God has spoken and continues to speak. They have mouths but do not speak; he has no mouth (because he is spirit), yet speaks. And since God speaks, we must listen. This is a constant theme of the Old Testament in all three of its main sections. Take the Law: 'love the LORD your God, listen to his voice.'⁴ And the wisdom literature in the Writings: 'To-day, Oh that ye would hear his voice!'⁵ There are also many examples in the Prophets. For instance, Israel's 'stubbornness' of heart, of which God kept complaining to Jeremiah, consists in the fact that they 'refuse to listen to my words'.⁶ The tragedy of this situation is that what constituted Israel as a special and distinct people was precisely that God had spoken to her and called her. Yet she neither listened nor responded. The result was judgment: 'When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen.'⁷ One might almost say that the epitaph engraved on the nation's tombstone was: 'The Lord God spoke to his people, but they refused to listen.' So then God sent his Son, saying, 'They will listen to my Son.' But instead they killed him.

Still today God speaks, although there is some disagreement in the church as to how he does so. I do not myself believe that he speaks

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to us directly and audibly, as he did for example to Abraham,⁸ to the boy Samuel⁹ or to Saul of Tarsus outside Damascus.¹⁰ Nor should we claim that he addresses us ‘face to face, as one speaks to a friend’,¹¹ since this intimate relationship which God had with Moses is specifically said to have been unique.¹² To be sure, Christ’s sheep know the Good Shepherd’s voice and follow him,¹³ for this is essential to our discipleship. But we are not promised that his voice will be audible.

What, then, about indirect utterances of God through prophets? We should certainly reject any claim that there are prophets today comparable to the biblical prophets. For they were the ‘mouth’ of God, special organs of revelation, whose teaching belongs to the foundation on which the church is built.¹⁴ There may well, however, be a prophetic gift of a secondary kind, as when God gives some people special insight into his Word and his will. But we should not ascribe infallibility to such communications. Instead, we should evaluate both the character and the message of those who claim to speak from God.¹⁵

The principal way in which God speaks to us today is through Scripture, as the church in every generation has recognized. The words that God spoke through the biblical authors, which he caused in his providence to be written and preserved, are not a dead letter. One of the special ministries of the Holy Spirit is to make God’s written Word ‘alive and active’ and ‘sharper than any double-edged sword’.¹⁶ So we must never separate the Word from the Spirit or the Spirit from the Word, for the simple reason that the Word of God is ‘the sword of the Spirit’,¹⁷ the chief weapon he uses to accomplish his purpose in his people’s lives. It is this confidence that enables us to think of Scripture as both written text and as living message. So Jesus could ask, ‘What is written?’¹⁸ and, ‘Have you never read?’,¹⁹ while Paul could ask, ‘What does Scripture say?’,²⁰ almost personifying it. In other words, Scripture (which means the written Word) can be either read or listened to, and what it says is what God says through

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it. Through his ancient Word, God addresses the modern world. He speaks through what he has spoken.

And God calls us to listen to what ‘the Spirit says to the churches’ through Scripture.²¹ The tragedy is that still today, as in Old Testament days, people often do not, cannot or will not listen to God. The non-communication between God and us is not because God is either dead or silent, but because we are not listening. If we are cut off during a telephone conversation, we do not jump to the conclusion that the person at the other end has died. No, it is the line which has gone dead.

Christians, too, can often become cut off from God. Is this not the main cause of the spiritual stagnation we sometimes experience? We have stopped listening to God. Perhaps we no longer have a daily quiet time of Bible reading and prayer. Or if we continue to do so, perhaps it is more a routine than a reality, because we are no longer expecting God to speak. We need, then, to adopt the attitude of Samuel and say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.’²² Like the servant of the Lord we should be able to say, ‘He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being instructed.’²³ We should imitate Mary of Bethany who ‘sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said’.²⁴ Of course, we have to be active as well as contemplative, to work as well as pray, to be Marthas as well as Marys. But have we allowed the Martha in us to crowd out the Mary? Have we neglected what Jesus called the ‘better’ option?²⁵

Listening to one another

In this second sphere of listening, the principle is clear: community depends on communication. It is only when we speak and listen to one another that our relationships develop and mature. When we stop listening to each other, relationships fall apart. There is a heavy emphasis in the book of Proverbs on the necessity and value of mutual listening. For example, ‘The way of fools seems right to them,

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but the wise listen to advice.’²⁶ Similarly, ‘Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise.’²⁷ Again, ‘The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge, for the ears of the wise seek it out.’²⁸ Here, then, are exhortations to listen to advice, rebuke and instruction, together with the statement that those who do so are wise. Moreover, this need to listen applies in every sphere of life, including the home, the workplace, the state and the church.

First, it applies to *the home*. I almost feel the need to apologize for saying something so traditional, but children and young people need to listen to their parents. ‘Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction, and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.’²⁹ The fact is that parents have more experience, and therefore usually more wisdom, than their offspring tend to give them credit for. Mark Twain had the candour to admit this. ‘When I was a boy of fourteen,’ he said, ‘my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years!’³⁰

But if children need to listen to their parents, parents need to be humble enough to listen to their children, or they will never understand their problems. For the world in which their children are growing up is vastly different from the world of their own youth. Only patient, mutual listening can bridge the generation gap.

Next, husband and wife need to listen to one another. Marriage breakdown is nearly always preceded by communication breakdown. For whatever reason (neglect, fatigue, self-centredness or pressure of business), husband and wife are no longer taking time to listen to each other. So they drift apart, and misunderstandings, suspicions, grievances and resentments increase, until it is too late – although in fact it is never too late to start listening again.

Second, listening is essential in *the workplace*. This seems to be widely recognized, as the art of listening is now included in books and seminars on business management. For example, in *The Language of Effective Listening*, Arthur Robertson says that ‘effective

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listening is the number one communication skill requisite to success in your professional and personal life'.³¹

Listening is especially important in conflict situations. Whenever there is a dispute in the workplace, it is almost certain that both sides have a reasonable case. Neither side is totally selfish or totally crazy. The essence of conciliation, therefore, is to persuade each side to listen to the other. Only when both sides are willing to sit down together, put aside their prejudiced positions and listen, does any possibility of reconciliation emerge.

Third, the same principle is applicable to *the state*. If democracy is government with the consent of the governed, then the governed have to be heard. Otherwise, they cannot be deemed to have given their consent. In 1864, shortly before the end of the American Civil War and before Congress's adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, Harriet Beecher Stowe interviewed Abraham Lincoln and wrote, 'Surrounded by all sorts of conflicting claims, by traitors, by half-hearted timid men, by Border States men and Free States men, by radical Abolitionists and Conservatives, Lincoln has listened to all, weighed the words of all . . .'³² The willingness to listen to all shades of opinion is an indispensable feature of true statesmanship.

Fourth, it is true in *the church*. Church history has been a long and somewhat dismal record of controversy. Usually important theological issues have been at stake. But, as often as not, they have been exacerbated by an unwillingness or inability to listen. I myself have tried never to engage in theological debate without first listening to the other person, or reading what he or she has written, or preferably both. Of course, disagreement cannot always be overcome by dialogue, but at least our misunderstanding is diminished and our integrity preserved.

This is even more so in the case of debates among evangelical Christians. When we stay apart, and our only contact is to lob hand grenades at one another across a demilitarized zone, a caricature of

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one's 'opponent' develops in one's mind, complete with horns, hooves and tail! But when we meet, sit together and begin to listen, it becomes evident that our opponents are not demons after all, but normal human beings, even sisters and brothers in Christ. Then the possibility of mutual understanding and respect grows. More than this: when we listen not only to what others are saying, but to what lies *behind* what they are saying, and in particular to what it is that they are so anxious to safeguard, we often find that we want to safeguard the same thing ourselves.³³

I am not claiming that this discipline is easy. Far from it. Listening with patient integrity to both sides of an argument can cause acute mental pain. It involves internalizing the debate until you not only grasp but *feel* the strength of both positions. Yet this is another aspect of the 'double listening' for which I am pleading in this series of books.

It is perhaps especially to pastors that God has committed the ministry of listening. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote of it with his customary insight:

The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them. It is God's love for us that he not only gives us his Word but also lends us his ear. So it is his work that we do for our brother when we learn to listen to him. Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking . . .

Brotherly pastoral care is essentially distinguished from preaching by the fact that, added to the task of speaking the Word, there is the obligation of listening. There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what

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the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother, and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person. This is no fulfilment of our obligation . . . Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by him who is himself the great listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.³⁴

Listening to the world

The contemporary world is positively reverberating with cries of anger, frustration and pain. Too often, however, we turn a deaf ear to these anguished voices.

First, there is the pain of those who have never heard the name of Jesus or, having heard of him, have not yet come to him. In their alienation and lostness they are hurting dreadfully. Our habit as evangelicals is to rush in with the gospel, to climb on our soapbox, and to declaim our message with little regard for the cultural situation or felt needs of the people concerned. As a result, more often than we would like to admit, we put people off, and even increase their alienation, because the way we present Christ is insensitive, clumsy and even irrelevant. Truly, ‘To answer before listening – that is folly and shame.’³⁵

It is better to listen before we speak, to seek to enter into the thoughts and feelings of others, to struggle to grasp their objections to the gospel, and only then to share the good news of Jesus Christ in a way that speaks to their need. This humble, searching, challenging activity is rightly called ‘contextualization’. But it is essential to add that to contextualize the gospel is not in any way to manipulate it. Authentic evangelism necessitates ‘double listening’. For Christian witnesses stand between the Word and the world with an obligation to listen to both, as we began to see in the Introduction.

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We listen to the Word to discover ever more of the riches of Christ. And we listen to the world to discern which of Christ's riches are needed most and how to present them in their best light.

This shows the nature and purpose of interfaith dialogue. Dialogue is neither a synonym nor a substitute for evangelism. Dialogue is a serious conversation in which we are prepared to listen and learn as well as to speak and teach. It is therefore an exercise in integrity. 'It is an activity in its own right,' Max Warren wrote. 'It is in its very essence an attempt at mutual "listening", listening in order to understand. Understanding is its reward.'³⁶ Warren knew what he was talking about, as he tells us in his autobiography:

My earliest memory is of dancing firelight, and of my mother reading to me. I am looking into the flames and listening. I must have been three or four years old . . . Long before I could read I was learning to listen, perhaps the most valuable lesson I ever learnt . . . What is more, reading has always been for me a form of listening. Books have always been 'persons' to me, not just the person of the author so much as the book itself talking, while I listened.³⁷

Second, there is the pain of the poor and the hungry, the dispossessed and the oppressed. Many of us have only relatively recently woken up to the obligation which Scripture has always laid on the people of God to care about social justice. We should be listening more attentively to the cries and sighs of those who are suffering. Here's a Bible verse which we have neglected, and which on that account we should perhaps underline. It contains a solemn word from God to those of his people who lack a social conscience. It is Proverbs 21:13: 'Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.'

To turn a deaf ear to somebody is a signal mark of disrespect. If we refuse to listen to someone, we are saying that we do not consider

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that person worth listening to. But there is only one person to whom we should refuse to listen on the grounds that he is not worth hearing and that is the devil, together with his emissaries. It is the essence of wisdom to be a discerning, discriminating listener and to choose carefully to whom we listen. Failure to do this was the folly of our first parents in the Garden of Eden. Instead of listening to the truth of God, they gave credence to the lies of Satan. And we are often crazy enough to copy them!

But we should not listen to the devil's talk, whether it be lies or propaganda, slander or gossip, filth or insults. 'The prudent overlook an insult.'³⁸ The same applies to anonymous letters or online comments. It is possible to be very upset by them, since they are usually rude. But why should we take seriously the criticisms of someone who lacks the courage to disclose their identity? Joseph Parker, a London minister in the nineteenth century, was climbing into his tall pulpit one Sunday morning when a woman in the gallery threw a piece of paper at him. Picking it up, he found that it contained a single word: 'Fool!' Dr Parker commented, 'I have received many anonymous letters in my life. Previously they have been a text without a signature. Today for the first time I have received a signature without a text!'

If we resolutely refuse to listen to anything that is untrue, unfair, unkind or impure, we should at the same time listen carefully to instruction and advice, criticism, reproof and correction, together with other people's views, concerns, problems and troubles. For, as has been well said, 'God has given us two ears, but only one mouth, so he evidently intends us to listen twice as much as we talk.'

To take time to listen to God and to our fellow human beings begins as a mark of courtesy and respect, continues as the means to mutual understanding and deepening relationships, and above all is an authentic token of Christian humility and love. So, 'everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry'.

Reflection questions from Tim Chester

- 1 Stott says, 'God speaks through what he has spoken.' What difference will it make when we view the Bible as the means through which God speaks today, as well as the record of what he spoke in the past?
- 2 Think of your home and workplace. Is there a relationship in which you need to listen more and speak less?
- 3 Think of an issue on which you disagree with another Christian. What lies behind what they are saying? What are they anxious to safeguard? What is the common ground you share?
- 4 Think of an individual or group you are trying to reach for Christ. What could you do to understand more deeply their thoughts, feelings and objections to the gospel?
- 5 'Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered.'³⁹ What does it mean for you to *open* your ears to the poor?
- 6 Do you prefer to talk or to listen? What does this say about your attitude to God? To other people? What is the link between listening and loving?