

Cybercolumn by Berry Simpson: Talking to God

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CYBER COLUMN: Talking to God

By Berry Simpson

I remember being surprised once at a men's spiritual retreat when a speaker had to defend and explain his direct communication from God. Growing up Baptist, I was more than comfortable with praying directly to God and expecting God to talk to me; I thought it was the standard expectation. It never occurred to me that maybe some Christians from different traditions found that a strange and frightening concept.

I've learned in the past few years that some people, nonbelievers and believers alike, are offended when someone like me talks about hearing directly from God. They think we're being arrogant and presumptuous. Who are you to expect God to talk to you? Do you think you are that much better than the rest of us? Isn't God busy enough already without having to deal with your personal trivia? Didn't God say all we needed to know in the Bible?

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Well, I ask the same question of myself: Who am I to expect God to speak to

me directly? But God does; it is unmistakable. And like Bob Sorge wrote (in *Secrets of the Secret Place*), "Hearing God's voice has become the singular quest of my heart, the sole pursuit that alone satisfies the great longings of my heart." I want more of it.

One of the reasons I read so many books is to understand people who are different from me. I like reading memoirs by Christians who found Jesus in their adult years, because their experience is so different from mine. I recently read a book by novelist Nevada Barr, a woman who stumbled into believing God after a life of substance abuse and bad relationships and fruitless attempts to find peace in every other source. In her book *Seeking Enlightenment, Hat by Hat*, she writes about certain people in her church who claimed to have heard directly from God in answer to their prayers: "When people talk to God, it makes everybody nervous. There is the creepy feeling that those who talk to God actually think he is listening; that they believe they've got an edge you lack."

And we've all read similar reactions to comments President Bush has made about praying for guidance. It makes some people mad that Bush thinks he can hear from God.

Maybe some of the hostile reaction is our own fault. Maybe we come across as people who have a corner on the truth. Maybe we sound like people who have an exclusive insight into the ways of God.

Here is another story from a different viewpoint: I remember a few years ago at a particularly contentious church business conference over a proposed expansion of our buildings, a church member got up to address the crowd, saying he had prayed over the issue and learned it was God's will for our church to turn down this proposal.

Well, my first thought was: Who are you to hear God's will for all the rest of us? How presumptive to think you are the one God spoke to, at the

exclusion of everyone else. Had he said he knew it was God's will for him to cast his own personal vote against the issue, I would have thought, "Good for you." But I balked at the idea that God told this member it was God's will for all of us to vote against the proposal.

So his comment made me angry, yet I'm not one of those like Nevada Barr who gets nervous any time anyone says they heard from God. In fact, I expect believers to say things like that. So why did it bother me this time? Was it simply because I disagreed with him? Was it because I was in favor of the proposed building project? Would I have felt better about his insight into God's will if I'd been on his side of the issue? I don't know.

But if it made me uncomfortable to hear another believer, in church, say they heard from God, I can only imagine how nervous it makes people who don't expect such intimate conversations with God.

I think one of our biggest challenges as Christians living in the 21st century is to learn how to talk about the things that are important to us, like prayer and hearing from God, without scaring our neighbors. Not that we have to backpedal what we believe; we just have to learn how to communicate better. We earn the right to proclaim God's will by the way we live our lives. If our life is consistent with what we say we believe, maybe we won't be so scary, even to those who disagree.

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