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WHY EVANGELICALS ARE RETURNING TO ROME

The Abandonment of *Sola Scriptura* as a Formal Principle

BY BOB DEWAAAY

The February 2008 edition of *Christianity Today* ran a cover story about evangelicals looking to the ancient Roman Catholic Church in order to find beliefs and practices.¹ What was shocking about the article was that both the author of the article and the senior managing editor of *CT* claim that this trip back to Rome is a good thing. Says Mark Galli the editor, “While the ancient church has captivated the evangelical imagination for some time, it hasn’t been until recently that it’s become an accepted fixture of the evangelical landscape. And this is for the good.”² Chris Armstrong, the author of the article who promotes the trip back to the ancient church, claims that because the movement is led by such persons as “Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, and living and practicing monks and nuns,” that therefore, “they are receiving good guidance on this road from wise teachers.” This he claims shows that, “Christ is guiding the process.”³

Apparently, contemporary evangelicals have forgotten that *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) was the formal principle of the Reformation. Teachings and practices that could not be justified from Scripture were rejected on that principle. To endorse a trip back to these practices of ancient Roman Catholicism is to reject the principle of *sola scriptura* being the normative authority for the beliefs and practices of the church. In this article I will explore how modern evangelicalism has compromised the principle of *sola scriptura* and thus paved smoothly the road back to Rome.

NEW “REFORMATIONS” COMPROMISE *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

Today at least three large movements within Protestantism claim to be new “reformations.” If we examine them closely we will find evidence that *sola scriptura* has been abandoned as a governing principle—if not formally, at least in practice. To have a new reformation requires the repudiation of the old Reformation. That in turn requires the repudiation of the formal principle of the Reformation. That’s where we’ll begin.

ROBERT SCHULLER AND RICK WARREN

In 1982, Robert Schuller issued a call for a new Reformation with the publication of his book, *Self Esteem: The New Reformation*.⁴ Schuller issued this fervent call: “Without a new theological reformation, the Christian church as the authentic body of Christ may not survive.”⁵ He was apparently aware that his reformation was of a different type than the original: “Where the sixteenth-century Reformation returned our focus to sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem! The fact is, the church will never succeed until it satisfies the human being’s hunger for self-value.”⁶ The problem is that Schuller based much of his self-esteem teaching on psychological theory and did not provide a rigorous Biblical defense of the idea.

Thus his reformation was a *de facto* denial of the Reformation principle of Scripture alone.

For example, Schuller criticized the Reformation for a faulty doctrine of sin: “Reformation theology failed to make clear that the core of sin is a lack of self-esteem.”⁷ But Schuller does not discuss the many verses in the Bible that define sin. For example: “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness” (1John 3:4). It is not hard to see that Schuller’s reformation constituted the abandonment of *sola scriptura* as a formal principle.⁸

In one sense, since Schuller’s call for a reformation based on self-esteem was made 26 years ago, one could argue that it never happened. Of course the idea of self-esteem is still around and taught by many evangelicals, but it never became the one key idea of the church. In another sense, however, Schuller’s reformation was broadened and transferred to others. In 2005 Schuller claimed the following as noted alumni of his institute: Bill Hybels, John Maxwell, Bishop Charles Blake, Rick Warren, Walt Kallestad, and Kirbyjon Caldwell. Bill Hybels himself credited Robert Schuller as a key person who influenced his ideas.⁹ Though Rick Warren disputes Schuller’s influence on his theology, he has carried forward Schuller’s idea of creating a church that meets people’s felt needs and thus attracts them.

But what interests us here is that Warren is now proposing yet another reformation:

And we’ve actually created what we call clinic-in-a-box, business-in-a-box, church-in-a-box, and we are using normal people, volunteers. When Jesus sent the disciples – this will be my last point – when Jesus sent the disciples

into a village he said, "Find the man of peace." And he said, "When you find the man of peace you start working with that person, and if they respond to you, you work with them. If they don't, you dust the dust off your shoes; you go to the next village." Who's the man of peace in any village – or it might be a woman of peace – who has the most respect, they're open and they're influential? They don't have to be a Christian. In fact, they could be a Muslim, but they're open and they're influential and you work with them to attack the five giants. And that's going to bring the second Reformation.¹⁰

The problem is that solving the world's five greatest problems as Warren defines them¹¹ using anyone willing to help regardless of religion, cannot be justified on Biblical grounds. If *sola scriptura* were the formal principle in Warren's theology, then he would provide vigorous, Biblical analysis using sound exegesis to ground his reformation on the authority of Scripture. But his teachings and public statements are not characterized by sound Biblical exegesis.

As I documented in my book on the Purpose Driven Movement, Warren's reformation compromises *sola scriptura* in many significant ways.¹² These include the use of loose paraphrases that go so far as to change the meaning of various passages, the integration of unbiblical, human wisdom, serious misinterpretation of Scripture, and an unbiblical philosophy of ministry. Warren has an orthodox statement about the authority of Scripture on his church Web site. In fact, most evangelicals other than those who convert to Roman Catholicism do not overtly reject Scripture alone. But is it practiced?¹³

There is reason to believe that Warren's reformation is the continuation of Schuller's in a modified form. Warren has made finding one's purpose the lynchpin of his teachings and practices. Finding purpose may not be iden-

tical to finding self esteem, but the idea is at least a first cousin. Also, both concepts derive their power from outside Scripture.

C. PETER WAGNER

Another proposed reformation of the church is C. Peter Wagner's New Apostolic Reformation. As I argued in a recent *CIC* article,¹⁴ Wagner sees the presence of apostles who speak authoritatively for God as the key to the church fulfilling her role in the world. He even speaks approvingly of the "apostles" of the Roman Catholic Church. Wagner and the thousands of apostles and prophets in his movement have shown as little regard for *sola scriptura* as any non Roman Catholic Christian group apart from the Quakers. So their reformation is a *de facto* repudiation of the Reformation. Their writings and messages show little or no concern for sound, systematic Biblical exegesis. If they were to adopt *sola scriptura* as a formal principle and rigorously use it to judge their own teachings and practices, their movement would immediately come to an end.

THE EMERGENT CHURCH

The third (if we count Warren's reformation as a current replacement for Schuller's) proposed reformation is that of the Emergent Church. In their case *sola scriptura* dies a thousand deaths. As we saw in the previous issue of *CIC*, Rob Bell denies it using the same arguments that Roman Catholics have used. The Emergent Church and its postmodern theology is noteworthy for being a non-Catholic version of Christianity that forthrightly assaults the type of use of the Bible that characterizes those who hold *sola scriptura* as the formal principle of their theology. The Emergent Church adherents reject systematic theology, and thus make using the principle impossible. For example, defending the doctrine of the Trinity using Scripture requires being systematic. I have read many Emergent/postmodern books as I write a new book, and each of them attacks systematic

theology in some way.

The Emergent Reformation rests on the denial of the validity of foundationalism. Gone are the days when Christians debated the relative merits of evidential and presuppositional apologetics—debates based on the need for a foundation for one's theology. Either one started with evidence for the authority of Scripture and then used the Bible as the foundation of one's theology; or one presupposed the Bible as the inerrant foundation. But today both approaches are mocked for their supposed naïveté. To think that one can know what the Bible means in a non-relativistic way is considered a throwback to now dead "modernity." The Emergent mantra concerning the Bible is "we cannot know, we cannot know, we cannot know." Furthermore, in their thinking, it is a sign of arrogance to claim to know. For the postmodern theologian, *sola scriptura* is as dead and buried as a fossilized relic of bygone days.

So the Protestant (if the term even means anything today) world is characterized by reformations that have either rejected or compromised *sola scriptura* as the formal principle for their theology. No wonder few voices of concern are raised at *Christianity Today's* proposed trip back to Rome to find beliefs and practices. Once *sola scriptura* has been rejected, there remain few reasons not to go back to Rome. If religious traditions can be considered normative, then why not embrace those with the longest history?

DALLAS WILLARD LEADS US BACK TO ROME

The cover of the *CT* article reads, "Lost Secrets of the Ancient Church." It shows a person with a shovel digging up a Catholic icon. What are these secrets? Besides icons, *lectio divina* and monasticism are mentioned. Dallas Willard, who is mentioned as a reliable guide for this process, has long directed Christians to monastic practices that he himself admits are not taught in the Bible.¹⁵ Willard pioneered the rejection of *sola scriptura* in practice on the

grounds that churches following it are failures. He writes, "All pleasing and doctrinally sound schemes of Christian education, church growth, and spiritual renewal came around at last to this disappointing result. But whose fault was this failure?"¹⁶ The "failure," according to Willard is that, ". . . the gospel preached and the instruction and example given these faithful ones simply do not do justice to the *nature of human personality, as embodied, incarnate.*"¹⁷ So what does this mean? It means that we have failed because our gospel had too little to do with our bodies.

The remedy for "failure" says Willard is to find practices in church history that are proven to work. But are these practices taught in the Bible? Willard admits that they are not by using an argument from silence, based on the phrase "exercise unto godliness" in 1 Timothy 4:7. Here is Willard's interpretation:

Or [the possibility the phrase was imprecise] does it indicate a precise course of action he [Paul] understood in definite terms, carefully followed himself, and called others to share? Of course it was the latter. So obviously so, for him and the readers of his own day, that he would feel no need to write a book on the disciplines of the spiritual life that explained systematically what he had in mind.¹⁸

But what does this do to *sola scriptura*? It negates it. In Willard's theology, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Biblical writers, forgot to inspire them to write about spiritual disciplines that all Christians need. If this is the case, then we need spiritual practices that were never prescribed in the Bible to obtain godliness.

Having determined the insufficiency of Scripture, Willard looks to human potential through tapping into spiritual powers: "It is the amazing *extent* of our ability to utilize power outside ourselves that we must consider when we ask what the human being is. The limits of our power to transcend ourselves utiliz-

ing powers not located in us—including of course, the spiritual—are yet to be fully known."¹⁹ So evidently our spirituality is to be discovered by various means that are not revealed by God in the Bible.

If the Bible is insufficient in regard to the spiritual practices that we need in order to become sanctified, where do we find them? Here is Willard's solution: "Practicing a *range* of activities that have proven track records across the centuries will keep us from erring."²⁰ This, of course leads us back to Rome. Catholic mystics spent centuries experimenting with spiritual practices without regard to the Biblical justification for such practices. If evangelicals are going to join them in rejecting Scripture alone, AGAIN they might as well not reinvent the wheel—go to the masters of mystical asceticism.

Willard admires the monastics and suggests that solitude is one of the most important disciplines. He says, "This factual priority of solitude is, I believe, a sound element in monastic asceticism. Locked into interaction with the human beings that make up our fallen world, it is all but impossible to grow in grace as one should."²¹ If it is impossible to grow in grace without solitude, why are we not informed of this fact by the Biblical writers? In Willard's mind *sola scriptura* is a false idea, so therefore God failed to reveal to us the most important way to grow in grace! Willard says that solitude is most important even while admitting that it is dangerous:

But solitude, like all the disciplines of the spirit, carries its risks. In solitude, we confront our own soul with its obscure forces and conflicts that escape our attention when we are interacting with others. Thus, [quoting Louis Bouyer] "Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and bust apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us . . . and discloses the fact that these abysses are haunted."²²

This danger was shown by the early desert fathers, some of whom came under demonic torment in their solitude. Before following people whose practices are dangerous and not prescribed in the Bible, wouldn't we be better off sticking to the safe ground of revealed truth?

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE UNCONVERTED

The fact is that the various ancient practices of the Roman Catholic Church are not unique to Christianity. The meditative techniques that make people feel closer to God work for those who do not even know God. Thomas Merton (who is recommended by Dallas Willard) went to the East to find spiritual practices. They work just as well for those who do not know Christ, probably better. Many ancient Roman Catholic practices were invented at times when many illiterate pagans were ushered into the church, sometimes at the point of a sword. Those pagans were not exactly the type to search the Scriptures daily in order to find the things of God.

But why are literate American Christians running away from *sola scriptura* at a time when searching the Scriptures (especially using computer technology) has never been easier? On this point I am offering my opinion, but there is good evidence for it. I believe that the lack of gospel preaching has allowed churches to fill up with the unregenerate. The unregenerate are not like "*newborn babes who long for the pure milk of the word*" (1 Peter 2:2). Those who have never received saving grace cannot grow by the means of grace. Those who are unconverted have not drawn near to God through the blood of Christ. But with mysticism, it is possible to *feel* near to God when one is far from Him. Furthermore, the unconverted have no means of sanctification because they do not have the imputed righteousness of Christ as their starting point and eternal standing. So they end up looking for man-made processes to engineer change through human works because they have nothing else.

Those who feel empty because of

the “pragmatic promises of the church-growth movement” as the CT article calls them, may need something far more fundamental than ancient, Catholic, ascetic practices. They may very well need to repent and believe the gospel. Those who are born of the Spirit will find that this passage is true: “*His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence*” (2Peter 1:3).

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the best antidote to rejecting *sola scriptura* and going back to Rome would be a careful study of the Book of Hebrews. It describes a situation that is analogous to that which evangelicals face today. The Hebrew Christians were considering going back to temple Judaism. Their reasons can be discerned by the admonitions and warnings in Hebrews. The key problem for them was the tangibility of the temple system, and the invisibility of the Christian faith. Just about everything that was offered to them by Christianity was invisible: the High Priest in heaven, the tabernacle in heaven, the once for all shed blood, and the throne of grace. At the end of Hebrews, the author of Hebrews points out that they have come to something better than mount Sinai: “*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel*” (Hebrews 12:22-24). All of these things are invisible.

But the life of faith does not require tangible visibility: “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1). The Roman Catholic Church has tangibility that is unmatched by the evangelical faith, just as temple Judaism had. Why have faith in the once-for-all shed blood of Christ that is unseen when you

can have *real* blood (that of the animals for temple Judaism and the Eucharistic Christ of Catholicism)? Why have the scriptures of the Biblical apostles and prophets who are now in heaven when you can have a real, live apostle and his teaching Magisterium who can continue to speak for God? The similarities to the situation described in Hebrews are striking. Why have only the Scriptures and the other means of grace when the Roman Church has everything from icons to relics to cathedrals to holy water and so many other tangible religious articles and experiences?

I urge my fellow evangelicals to seriously consider the consequences of rejecting *sola scriptura* as the formal principle of our theology. If my Hebrews analogy is correct, such a rejection is tantamount to apostasy.

END NOTES

1. Chris Armstong, “The Future lies in the Past” in *Christianity Today*, February 2008. I wrote a critique of Armstrong’s article here: http://www.christianworldviewnetwork.com/article.php/3174/Bob_De_Waay
2. Mark Galli, “Ancient-Future People” in *Christianity Today* February 2008, 7.
3. Armstrong, 24.
4. Robert H. Schuller, *Self Esteem The New Reformation*, (Waco: Word, 1982).
5. Ibid. 25.
6. Ibid. 38.
7. Ibid. 98.
8. I wrote an article some years ago about Schuller’s self-esteem reformation: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue18.htm>
9. Robert Schuller, *Your Church as a Fantastic Future*, (Ventura: Regal Books, 1986) On pages 227, 228 Hybels testifies of Schuller’s influence.
10. <http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=80> page 16. [Accessed 8/27/2005]
11. The five are spiritual darkness, lack of servant leaders, poverty, disease,

and ignorance.

12. Bob DeWaay, *Redefining Christianity—Understanding the Purpose Driven Movement*, (21st Century Press: Springfield, MO, 2006).
13. My claim is that *sola scriptura* no longer serves as the formal principle of their theology in practice. This is seen whenever important religious claims (such as the need for a reformation) are not accompanied by rigorous, systematic, Biblical exegesis on the topic at hand. I say that because by implication, Scripture alone means that beliefs and practices are normative if—and only if—they can be shown to be Biblical. Binding and loosing have to be in accordance with the teachings of Christ and His apostles. Warren’s practice belies his statement of faith.
14. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue103.htm>
15. I critique Dallas Willard’s theology as taught in his popular book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* in CIC Issue 91: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue91.htm>
16. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines, Understanding How God Changes Lives*, (HarperCollins: New York, 1991). 18.
17. Ibid. emphasis his.
18. Ibid. 95.
19. Ibid. 62.
20. Ibid. 158.
21. Ibid. 162.
22. Ibid. 161.

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HEAR GOD'S VOICE – GUARANTEED? A CRITIQUE OF MARK VIRKLER'S *HEARING GOD'S VOICE*

By K. Jentoft

Mark Virkler recently presented his seminar, *Hearing God's Voice – Guaranteed*, at an "Equipping Conference" sponsored by International Lutheran Renewal. The conference was designed to teach Christians how to hear the voice of God. Some friends expressed concern that family members were planning to attend the conference, so I wrote the following article and passed it out at the conference as a brochure. Then I attended part of the conference.

In his Saturday afternoon message Virkler taught that the only guaranteed method he's proven in order for people to hear God's voice with certainty is "to listen to their spontaneous thoughts and write them down." He also described his *discernment safeguard*: our thoughts must be written and submitted to three spiritual advisors for review with only the weakest appeal to the scriptures. He claimed that if three spiritual advisors "feel" that the journaled words are from God, then they are certainly God's words. Moreover, Virkler claims that pagans and non-Christians equally hear the voice of God through this method and named Albert Einstein as an example.¹

GOD DECIDES TO SPEAK THROUGH MEDIATORS

Virkler's chief claim in his book *Hearing God's Voice* is that "God's voice is a flow of spontaneous thoughts in our heart."² This is the antithesis of how God has certainly spoken to humanity throughout history and minimizes the authority of the scriptures. Virkler's book and seminar minimize reason and rationality with claims that mystical inner thoughts and visions speak for God. This defective teaching, no matter how kind and sincere a man Virkler proves to be, will damage the ones who believe and follow it. It has eternal consequences. The scripture verse Virkler

quotes on the cover of his book *Hearing God's Voice*, "We have heard His voice...We have seen this day that God speaks with Man," proves his claim is wrong. In fact, the passage in Deuteronomy 5 is a vivid description of God's voice that was tangible and experienced through their physical senses. These people heard God with their physical ears and saw the fire on the mountain. They heard and understood His words with their rational minds; quite different from a mystical "spontaneous flow of thoughts in their hearts." Israel was overwhelmed by God's tangible voice and asked God for a human mediator – requesting that God would speak to them through a man instead. God declared this request for a mediator between His people and Himself was good and that it pleased Him. Here is the passage in Deuteronomy 5:

You said, "Behold, the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, yet he lives. Now then why should we die? ...Go near and hear all that the LORD our God says; then speak to us all that the LORD our God speaks to you, and we will hear and do it." The LORD heard the voice of your words when you spoke to me, and the LORD said to me, "I have heard the voice of the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They have done well in all that they have spoken." (Deuteronomy 5:24, 25, 27, 28)

Later in Deuteronomy God repeats that the people's request pleased Him:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him. This is

according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, "Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die." The LORD said to me, "They have spoken well. I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." (Deuteronomy 18:15-18)

Compare this to what Mark Virkler explains about the same incident:

They didn't expect that the voice of God would come with the fire of God, and **they decided they would rather not have a relationship with Him if He was going to be that way!** Instead they chose to send Moses to God as their representative, to let him have the relationship and find out what God wanted them to do. God agreed to their request but warned that, first, He was not going to stop talking. If they didn't want to hear Him, they would have to leave.³

Virkler's book claims that the people decided against having a relationship with God when they requested that Moses be the mediator. How could God say, "They have done well in all that they have spoken," if they were rejecting God as Virkler claims? Obviously God was pleased because He desired to speak to His people through a man as a mediator, and the first official mediator was Moses. According to Moses, God also chose other men—the prophets—as messengers to speak to His people. Thus, throughout history, the people of Israel always heard the voice of God with physical ears, tangibly from the

mouths of real men. The nation of Israel was not composed of mystics seeking personal revelations in spontaneous thoughts. God's voice was not to be heard or experienced on demand "freestyle" as each person felt. The book of Judges depicts the closest thing to personal freestyle revelations in which "each man did what was right in his own eyes." It also declares that this led to a defective understanding of God and damaging actions by His people. God's voice spoken to the real ears of His people by real vocal cords of His messengers is radically different than a mystical internal experience cut off from the physical senses that Virkler's teaching is promoting.

PHYSICAL SENSES VS. MYSTICISM

In fact, in Deuteronomy we find that God provided His people with the certified method of hearing His voice, to listen to the words of His prophet. God officially chose to speak through these men as His mediators. The obvious question the people raised was, "How can we tell who Your prophet is and who isn't?" God anticipated this question and gave them specific criteria to judge whether a man was His mouthpiece or not:

You may say in your heart, "How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?" When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him. (Deuteronomy 18:21, 22)

God did not leave "discernment" of the prophet to subjectivity or feelings—or even whether or not he was a nice guy. God demanded that His people discern prophets, and therefore His voice, with their rational minds and physical senses.

Compare the concept of hearing God's voice with our physical senses to Virkler's teaching. In *The four Keys to Hearing from God*, Virkler quotes Habakkuk 2:1-2 as the proof text that

God speaks to us internally in spontaneous thoughts, visions, feelings, or impressions when we quiet our minds—guaranteed.

I will stand on my guard post And station myself on the rampart; And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, And how I may reply when I am reprov'd. Then the Lord answered me and said, "Record the vision And inscribe it on tablets, That the one who reads it may run." (Habakkuk 2:1, 2)

Look at what the very next verse states. Habakkuk claims that his words will certainly come to pass: "*For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay*" (Habakkuk 2:3). We see that Habakkuk's proof for claiming to be a legitimate prophet in chapter 3:1 is consistent with the criteria God commanded in Deuteronomy 18. People would know that Habakkuk's words were certainly God's voice because they would certainly come to pass. They could rely on them all to be true.

All Israelites who had heard Habakkuk speak or had read his words would have been hearing the voice of God with their physical ears or seeing His words with their physical eyes. Those who refused to listen or would not read the writings of Habakkuk were not hearing the voice of God as they should have been. Those who disobeyed Habakkuk's words were disobeying God. Please note that the emotions or feelings of those who heard Habakkuk were not as important as their physically having heard the words of God's mediator. Having feelings or having discussed them with "spiritual advisors" had no bearing on deciding whether or not the prophet's words were God's.

Virkler's teaching continuously pushes his followers into mysticism and internal experiences in their imagination. Calling internal impressions and spontaneous thoughts "the Spirit," Virkler minimizes rational understand-

ing. On page 25 Virkler advocates a worldview he calls "Rationalism/Mysticism Combined." He teaches people to imagine Jesus in their minds and coaches them to see spiritual visions when he writes, "How to see a vision (pictures which light upon your mind)." This concept is absent from scripture. God does not command us to train our imaginations to see Jesus in our hearts or to seek His voice there. Instead we are told that Jesus is in heaven seated physically at the right hand of God the Father waiting to return. In fact, God discourages imagination when it comes to hearing His voice. God's true voice spoken through His mediator Jeremiah said this: "*Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; They speak a vision of their own imagination, Not from the mouth of the Lord'*" (Jeremiah 23:16).

MYSTICISM - FALSE PROPHETS TO OURSELVES

When God speaks we have only two choices: obey Him or sin. Falsely claiming to speak for God is damaging because people are deluded into serving something or someone other than God. This is why it is so important to have a clear voice of God and why false prophets were to be stoned. While we tend to apply "they speak a vision of their own imagination" to the words of others who claim to speak God's words, this should also be applied to all those who claim their own imaginations are certainly the voice of God speaking to them internally. This means that mystics who don't meet Deuteronomy 18's 100 percent accuracy requirement are false prophets to themselves when they claim their spontaneous thoughts, visions, feelings, or impressions are certainly God's voice. This is exactly where Virkler's teachings lead us—he trains us to become false prophets unto ourselves! His seminar *Hearing the Voice of God - Guaranteed* claims that our spontaneous thoughts are certainly God's voice. Contrast to this mystical approach to God's tangible voice that

speaks through Scripture:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

GOD BECOMES MAN AND SPEAKS

The ultimate expression of God's voice was a through a man who spoke to us with audible words, heard by men with physical ears, and written down for us with their own hands. These words continue to speak to us. This Man was the great prophet and mediator that Moses spoke about in **Deuteronomy 18:15**, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him." In a scene similar to Sinai, God descends upon a mountain in a cloud and commands 3 men standing in the presence of Moses to listen to Jesus, His Son (Mark 9:7). Peter, in Acts 3:22, and Stephen, in Acts 7:37, claimed that the man Jesus was this prophet Moses promised. Although nobody has ever seen the Father, the man Jesus is our mediator. With his mouth Jesus has spoken the Father's words to us—words that we cannot hear or experience directly. The words of the man Jesus ARE the voice of God, spoken and understood by humans (the apostles) through their physical senses who wrote them down for our edification.

This is exactly what John wanted us to hear and believe. 1 John 1 tells us:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life and the life was manifested, and we have

seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1John 1:1-4)

How far is this from the concept that God's voice is to be sought in our spontaneous thoughts, visions, feelings or impressions? John knew that the words and claims made by the man Jesus were true because Jesus was bodily raised from the dead and John witnessed this with His physical senses. John wrote them down so that we might have fellowship with the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the church. Our relationship with God is accomplished through the words communicated to us by men who physically experienced them.

IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE TO MYSTICISM? HEAR GOD'S VOICE – GUARANTEED (FOR REAL)

I would like to propose an alternative method in order to hear God's voice with certainty. The concept is this: listen only to those men whom God has certified as His messengers. In other words, don't follow mystics. Rather, "hear" the voice of God through scripture with your physical senses as communicated by these men. First, the trustworthy voice of God has spoken to Moses. Moses continues to speak God's words to us even now through scripture, and to those words we remain accountable. Second, God's voice speaks to us through the prophets who came after Moses, through history, to Malachi. Most importantly, God's voice is heard in the words of the man Jesus as well as those men whom He physically appointed as His spokesmen (before other men who testified to that appointment through their physical senses as John

did). In short, the guaranteed method by which we hear God's voice is to read and study the scriptures in order to understand what the human authors were attempting to convey through their words.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND SCRIPTURE

After Christ ascended to the Father, He sent the Holy Spirit to those who believed in the voice of the Man He appointed. "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (**John 14:26**). One of the primary tasks of the Spirit was to enable Jesus' human companions to remember the words He had spoken to them. Jesus had physically and objectively spoken to all of His appointed apostles including Paul. The same Holy Spirit continues to help us as well, not through mystical experience, but by bringing to our remembrance the voice of God spoken to us by these men and by helping us to see the application of their words to our own lives. The unseen Holy Spirit's job is to testify to the One Mediator who was tangible and human. These men through the Spirit conveyed to us the voice of God in their writings. In scriptures we have God's love letter to humanity explaining where we find fellowship and relationship with Him. All who believe the words delivered to us by these men enter God's family, becoming His children and escaping His coming wrath. Those who claim there is no relationship without tangible two-way mystical dialog are deluded and deny the promise of the gospel. Even as a soldier held prisoner is still married to his wife while separated from her, having only her letters to read in his cell, so we are related to God if we believe in the words of those He sent to us. When He tangibly returns as a man, we will be with Him and rejoice.

The Holy Spirit is active in the words of scripture and uses God's certain voice spoken there to convict and sanctify us. Those who understand, believe, and obey these written words

will receive eternal life when they are physically reunited with their Mediator. In John 5 we see that though the Pharisees studied the words of Moses, they did not believe or obey them. Jesus says to them, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (John 5:46, 47). In the manner of Virkler, these Pharisees had “imagined” their own laws concerning the Sabbath and had set their spontaneous thoughts, impressions, and feelings as laws above God’s certain voice. The Pharisees were condemned because they did not obey the voice of God spoken through Moses, not because they obeyed it too well.

INTERNAL IMPRESSIONS, FEELINGS AND PROVIDENCE

I am not claiming that God, in His providence, does not give us feelings or is not involved in our impressions. I am claiming that we can never be “guaranteed” that these feelings or impressions are God’s voice because there are many sources for impressions in our lives, and we are not infallible. We can only be “guaranteed” of hearing God’s voice through hearing the words of God’s chosen messengers. God has revealed His will to us in scripture, and we obey it or we sin. In all areas God has not revealed concerning our lives we have liberty to decide and to act as we wish—without fear. For example, obvious areas of liberty include choosing a mate or a career. God gives us liberty to make decisions in these areas by whatever cri-

teria we wish to use, even irrational reasons, feelings, or passions. We can choose a career because of a dream or choose to marry someone because of an impression. God has given us liberty to choose. This does not mean that all choices are identically wise or that they will have the same results. It is usually advisable to make the wisest decisions we are capable of. Regarding areas in which God has not revealed in the scripture, God’s will for us remains hidden until it occurs providentially in history. Continuing on the example faced by a single person concerning marriage, God has not forbidden marriage (and even calls teachings that do so the “doctrine of demons”). Thus, single people have liberty to get married to eligible unmarried singles. Among all the eligible people in the world, the single person has liberty to choose a marriage partner. Whom God has chosen as the spouse remains a mystery until the marriage happens. We know by Jesus’ words, however, that once they have made their decision and have married, God Himself has joined them together. “For what God has joined together let no man separate.” They chose, and God’s will was done.

COMPATIBILISM

The concept “compatibilism” means that we choose and are responsible for our choices, but God’s providential will is being accomplished through our choices. The Holy Spirit is active in our thoughts, desires, decisions, and daily life in order to accomplish God’s pur-

poses in us, whether we feel it or not. We find comfort in the afflictions and effects of our choices, knowing that God has promised to work all things together for good those who love the Lord and are called according to His purposes. We read and study His certain words to grow in understanding and obedience to His revealed will as He commanded. We live and make decisions without guilt or fear in all areas of liberty that are not revealed. As we do this, God’s Holy Spirit is active in the lives of believers, and all things are working for eternal good in their lives as they make decisions and live with the results.

END NOTES

1. You can hear excerpts of Virkler’s claims here:
<http://www.markvirkler.info/>
2. Mark and Patti Virkler, *How to Hear God’s Voice*, (Shippensburg: Destiny Image, 2005)
3. Ibid. 19.

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