

## **Living voice**

There is an assertion in Roman Catholic propaganda already found before Vatican 1 and from time to time revived, to the effect that God must have given the active guidance of the Spirit, the “living voice”, on all topics to the church in perpetuity. The pope is argued to be the only plausible person to receive that guidance and express it in his pronouncements. Therefore Rome is the only true (complete) church. Other bodies such as the Orthodox may have a valid ministry but are not so endowed and so are not complete. Anglicans do not even have a valid ministry.

The reality of the nineteenth century is that as the papacy lost temporal power it discovered the possibilities of the emerging mass media (cheap printing). For the first time, the pope could communicate directly with large numbers of the faithful, not depending on bishops and priests to pass on (or distort) the message. Subsequent technologies (radio, internet) have enhanced this.

The topic is always tangled. Is there a living voice (of the Holy Spirit), and if so where is it to be found? Or should we accept the “dead voice” of established teaching which at least exists?

To be fair, the “living voice” does not necessarily mean new teachings. Many of the multiplied papal pronouncements of the period after 1870 do not involve any new doctrine, merely the application of existing doctrine. At most, the “living voice” theory enhances their authority.

The assertion of the living voice in the papacy countered the Oxford Movement position that the doctrine of the early church was all that was needed. It was not plausible then to locate a living voice in the state-appointed English bishops! Besides, the first generation of the Oxford Movement did not believe that change (as opposed to restoration) was needed. They could also appeal to an Elizabethan instruction that preachers should confine themselves to doctrine accepted in the early fathers. Warning: much has changed in Anglo-catholicism since that first generation!

The Orthodox were not then well equipped to formulate a response, but probably they would have taken a similar view, that established and codified Orthodox doctrine was sufficient for all time.

These responses are not quite same as the protestant position that scripture is all we need, but the effect is much the same. Everything that we need has long been known. Wise protestants did not assert a new revelation at the reformation, but a return to truths which had already been revealed. Nor is there anything new in subsequent evangelical “revivals” - these are believed to be the work of the Spirit, but are not doctrinally innovative.

In all these cases, it is accepted that there was a time when the Spirit was guiding the church into all truth. Not everything can be given at once, and we might expect a pattern of “diminishing returns” as the corpus of doctrine was progressively established. But this work has long ago been completed (or the Spirit is remarkably inefficient!) Revelation is complete and so the Spirit has nothing new to say. This argument applies only to doctrine; the Spirit might have much to say on the application of the established doctrine to new particular cases. But that tended to be solved in the West (Roman or protestant) by casuistry, in England not least by Taylor (Anglican) or Baxter (Presbyterian).

Can new doctrine now be revealed? The “Romish doctrine concerning purgatory” spread after and rather depended on visions then recently received (after the close of the Patristic period). John Austin Baker held that the ordination of women did depend on a new revelation, which he said had been provided through the secular world. This argument was not widely accepted even by those who supported the ordination of women. Nor has the sexual revolution been widely claimed to be endorsed by such a new revelation. For if either, why not accept the secular revelation of “the necessity of atheism”? We might well say that only a new authenticated revelation by the Spirit to the Church could legitimise these changes (and not others) and the evidence for it is lacking.

In this context, the early church took it for granted that the Spirit was only active in the Church. Compare the Prayer Book catechism – the Father made all the world, the Son redeemed all mankind, but the spirit sanctifies (note the change of tense) only “me and all the elect people of God”. The “elect” explicitly includes the candidate; there is no invisible church into which to enter. Whatever of God can be learnt from the natural order (and not from the secular world as largely influenced by Satan) is good, but not a Spirit-led revelation.

Note that the view in the early church in the face of Montanism was that prophecy (undoubtedly a gift of the Spirit providing a “living voice” though not necessarily imparting new doctrine) had ceased. This could be held either empirically (minimum posture: the Montanist prophecies can be seen not to have been inspired while others at the same time might be; maximum posture: there are no longer in our experience any inspired prophecies) or theologically (the gift of prophecy clearly existing in the New Testament period can be proved to have been only temporary).

The obvious truth is that the earliest church had to be guided by Spirit to work out the implications of Christ's life and resurrection, particularly as the church became mainly gentile. The writing of the New Testament books, let alone their recognition, was not immediate. But these Spirit-led developments have happened. The church cannot revisit them without (humanly) destroying all its credibility and (divinely) rejecting the guidance of the Spirit already received.

It is an interesting comparison that in the view of rabbinic Judaism the gift of the Spirit gave way (after prophecy ceased shortly after the return from exile) to the Bath Qol (an echo), and that this (if still experienced) could be overruled by rabbinic argument. “It is not in heaven”.

So much for background. Surely God the Holy Spirit cannot be stifled. If he (Latin) she (Semitic) or it (Greek) wishes, he will communicate with the church. Long apparent silence (which might reflect a human determination not to listen rather than an actual silence of the Spirit) does not prove a perpetual impossibility of such communication.

Human instruction to the Holy Spirit to be silent will not work, obviously.

The Holy Spirit is surely is not limited to any particular channel within the Church. (It remains a matter for theological debate whether the Holy Spirit limits himself to the Church, or at times communicates with the world outside.) There were non-apostolic prophets in the New Testament period and shortly afterwards (see the four prophetesses in Acts 21.9). The sacred ministry as a whole (or a part of it such as the Bishop of Rome) is not therefore solely privileged to receive such communications – though it has the difficult task of deciding whether a communication is authentic. Similarly, in the Old Testament many prophets were not priests. The Petrine promises do not confer a privilege of receiving communications from the Spirit, though they may imply that bishops (including the pope) have both duties and the promise of divine guidance in their authentication.

God does not change his mind. Any new revelation must be consistent with what has already been revealed, though it may be a development. Of course, the Spirit may be reminding us of an old truth, or of the need to apply it, rather than imparting a new one. Not all revelations are innovations!

Consequently, it is not wholly precluded that on some occasions the papacy may be (and sometimes has been) so inspired by the Spirit as to be a living voice. To deny that, one would have to believe that each pope became antichrist by consequence of being appointed to that office, a most peculiar unapostolic succession in inability to be inspired. (This might be authentic Calvinist doctrine – let the better informed comment.) But a possibility of a living voice sometimes delivered through the papacy does not mean that any and every papal utterance is inspired. Some at Vatican 1 believed just that and wanted it endorsed, but it is not Roman teaching or what was then defined. Indeed, apart from canonisations there has only been one “infallible” declaration since 1870! Still less does it mean that the Spirit can (since when?) only communicate through the papacy.

The modern Vatican system, churning out numerous communications in the name of the pope, is humanly able to be careful. This means that gross error is unlikely (if the premises are sound) and that such communications should be studied by less well equipped Christian bodies with cautious respect on their merits. But that system, like anything else in the world, is vulnerable to corruption. There is no divine guarantee except that in the long term the gates of hell will not prevail.

There may then be communications from the Spirit to the Church, the best meaning of the “living voice”, which means that we cannot preclude the gift of prophecy even in these our days. Such communications might come to any Christian. But we should be very careful in “testing the spirits”. And the first test is consistency with the faith already received. One would be the more willing to receive a prophecy if it called the church to remember teaching already received but neglected.

This has some similarity to a protestant expectation that though scripture is complete, sufficient and final, nevertheless God has new things to reveal from within his Word.

These somewhat different approaches allow that there was “development of doctrine” for a time, under the guidance of the Spirit, but that any further development as opposed to recovery is most unlikely. However, this is a major topic best treated separately.

There has at times been talk in Anglicanism of a “threefold cord”. I suggest that this is best understood as a threefold means of testing. If we are to receive an apparent utterance of the Spirit, it should be tested against scripture, tradition and reason. This is not at all the same as to make these three more or less equal sources of revelation.

But the living voice of the Spirit in the Church is not confined to major teachings, whether new or revived, which seem to approximate to prophecies. If it is a reality at all, it should be expected to bear fruit (in the varied “gifts of the Spirit” identified by Paul) in ordinary collective Christian experience, and not least in regular Christian worship. There is a mistaken instinct that the gifts were and must still be purely individual; surely the Spirit may inspire a congregation.

Every preacher hopes and prays that his words are inspired and that therefore there is in some sense a living voice in his preaching. That does not mean that anything truly new is said (which would be dangerous) though the application may be new at least to the hearers, but only that the hearers (and indeed the preacher!) will be helped to deepen their relationship with God thereby.

Every other aspect of worship (readings, hymns and other music, intercessions) can be a means which the Spirit may use. That is why we should try to secure their quality as may be appropriate to the congregation. This does not mean that we should be always invoking the Spirit, let alone devising mechanisms to encourage his involvement! Excitement can be whipped up, but this is not the work of the Spirit though it should be recognised that excitement might be a fruit of the Spirit, or rather a natural consequence of receiving spiritual gifts. Modern Western worship too easily sinks to the didactic (and that to the moralising or politicising) or the trivial.

Not that we should neglect the individual working of the Spirit. Every Christian trusts that the Spirit will guide the life of private prayer. Such guidance will extend to the unspectacular; it is not just a matter of mystical experiences. But the wise advice of those more skilled in prayer than I am is that Satan disguises himself; in the long run the believer will suffer no harm from doubting a genuine experience of the Spirit, but may suffer much harm from accepting a counterfeit. We have to be careful.

God may by the Spirit call any Christian to a particular vocation, and many such vocations will not be ecclesiastical or apparently heroic. Again, not all such seeming calls are genuine and even those that are may be misunderstood. We have to be careful.

Meanwhile, we must not neglect the “dead voice”. No theological college teaches the exercise of the gift of prophecy. That would be absurd. The most that could be instilled (hardly taught) is the need to be open to the Spirit. But all theological colleges or other training systems should teach the deposit of faith, to give the ministry a sound foundation. No minister of religion should be without a personal library of sound theology. Not that any of the books in that library will be infallible, or that the books will be in total agreement. But it is a profound mistake to think that the “living voice” is a substitute for the study of the understanding of the wider church, whose members include the dead. The Spirit is unlikely to reward or compensate for laziness!

To sum up: if God the Holy Spirit wills, and as he wills, there is a living voice in the church. If we are members of the church, that voice may come to us. We must be careful, however, and test what is received. And, ironically, for that testing (as for Christian thinking in general) one of our best tools is the “dead voice” of established teaching!

As a minor consequence, we hold that papal utterances are not privileged, either positively or negatively.

The following reflection on the above essay from Michael Silver is pertinent. I do not know whether the reference to another religion is factually correct, but the point is sure enough. We can imagine a single totally coherent revelation. This is not what we have. We were given not a systematic theology but a Way. He comments:

Fundamentally we are confronted by the foundational oddity of one God, many voices. Counter-intuitively in both Old and New Testaments God's revelation is refracted polyphonically. It is the Synoptic Problem writ large. In the abstract we might have expected something more like the Q'ran - one voice, one account. On one level, divergent narratives may be indicating the transcendence of God's truth and an accommodation to (fallen) conditions and creaturely capacity? There are probably no end of guesses as to God's method.

We have to contend with interpretive extremities: a) from the many to the one, or b) the more the merrier! At one point there is the desire to homogenise, at the other a delight in disorder. It is because the latter is so purposeless that the former has such appeal. Modern Christianity loves the debate but has no time for the revelation. For the sincere the question is what/who has the casting vote: Scripture, Councils, Succession, reason, magisterium, imperial decree/parliament, historical criticism or papacy? None of these actually cover all eventualities, and they don't work much better in combination. The Church remains unable to heal itself and many end up worshipping a date.

In our time, we have lived to see 'authority' quickly degenerate into opinion, and then into flux. Consider the process of canonisation - a fairly critical act, one might think. This has changed beyond all recognition over the centuries. Now the threshold seems surprisingly low?

Words of Bishop Weston sometimes come to mind (not actually a great favourite of mine) but this hits the mark: "I would never ask a Priest to obey the dicta of a Bishop. I have been a Bishop for fifteen years, and I do not think that I have ever asked a priest simply to obey my opinion; but I always beg of them and they listen that when we are agreed that this is Catholic, and this is useful... then they obey."