

**Listen! Hearing That Still, Small Voice and Finding Your Own
Part 3: Meet the Committee**

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Scripture: Romans 12:2-5

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

I. What good is belief?

Years ago, Princeton University religious studies professor, Jeffrey Stout, raised an important challenge to contemporary Christians that I have never forgotten. He asserted that, if Christians want to be taken seriously in the public square, they need to specify how their belief in God makes it reasonable for them to do or to risk things that a reasonable person who does not believe in God would not do or risk.

In other words, if Christian faith makes no practical difference in the way a person lives, or in the way a person proposes that we should live our common life, then a person looking at Christianity from the outside would feel entitled to conclude that the idea of God is meaningless. If there is no difference between belief and unbelief, what good is belief?

Professor Stout's question is one I'll pose to you: **How does your faith make it reasonable for you to risk or do things that a reasonable person who does not share your particular faith would not risk or do?**

In his Letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul makes much the same challenge when he asserts, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect."

According to Paul, connecting with the God of Jesus *changes* a person. It transforms us in such a way that we think and act differently than others. Jesus said this kind of transformation enables us to become a "new Creation" born not of water but Spirit. (John 3:5)

In a day when some of us within Christianity press for greater and greater inclusivity of all people in response to an intuition that God loves everyone – Christian or otherwise – any claim that differentiates a Christian from anyone else is immediately held suspect. We have witnessed far too many examples of Christians who seem to believe, or overtly proclaim, that

their beliefs make them better than everyone else, and more righteous. Adding insult to injury, a number of these same Christians tend to get caught doing things that are so far off the mark that they would make even the most libertine blush.

We “inclusive” Christians tend to emphasize our commonalities with others, over our differences. And we’re so concerned with not seeming “holier than thou” that we often deny that any difference exists between Christians and others.

Yet, if Christian belief in God does not “make it reasonable for us to do or to risk things that a reasonable person who does not believe in God would not do or risk” then is not Professor Stout right in asking, “What good is belief?”

Before you get your hackles up, thinking that I am about to make some sort of case that we should take a page from the fundamentalist handbook and draw distinct lines between “us” and “them,” please hear what I am not saying, as well as what I am saying.

I do not claim that my faith, or yours, makes us any better than anyone else. Nor do I believe we are any wiser or more perfect than anyone else.

If anything, my faith is more apt to focus me not on the faults and shortcomings of others, but on my own. It’s not that my faith is a downer. In fact, quite the opposite. The reason why my shortcomings and faults come into sharper focus though my faith is because what also comes into sharper focus is God’s love and grace, and God’s wisdom.

My faith tells me that God loves all of us beyond our wildest imagination – without a single exception. Yet I don’t love people to this extent, or in this way.

My faith tells me that God’s generosity is endless, and God’s grace knows no bounds. Yet my own generosity and grace are quite limited and conditional.

In other words, God approaches the world from a far higher state of consciousness than I can shake a stick at. God is connected to a far larger story than I can see – and sees me and you connected to this story in ways that we cannot.

This is why I pray.

This is why I pray a lot.

Einstein once observed that, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” I pray a lot because if my goal is to solve my very human problems, I need to turn to a form of consciousness that is far higher than ours.

II. Meet the Committee

Of course, actually connecting with this higher consciousness is easier said than done. Or rather, it is probably more accurate to say that *connection* not the actual problem – since God is

Spirit, we are spiritual beings, and spirit speaks to spirit. Rather, the problem is *trusting* the connection.

After all, there are so many voices swirling around our heads at any given moment that it's hard to distinguish between them all. Aren't we all like walking committees? One voice tells us to turn left, another to turn right. One tells us to run, another tells us to walk; still another insists that we turn around and head in an entirely different direction. Which one of these "committee members" represents the Spirit's voice?

In the fifth century, St. Augustine observed that the path to knowing God and the path to knowing yourself is the same path. Augustine was well-acquainted with the myriad voices within us, some of which are more than happy to make exclusive claims on our loyalty and devotion. Thus, listening for the Spirit's voice is not about convincing God to speak to us, but rather, tuning into a particular voice that that we have either not noticed before, or have noticed but not considered it to bear higher wisdom.

Often, we miss the wisdom in the Spirit's voice because it strikes us as either illogical or disruptive to our current path. Really, why *wouldn't* the Spirit's guidance seem either illogical or disruptive? We only see a fraction of our story. The Spirit sees the whole thing, and seeks to guide us from this standpoint. Therefore, why *wouldn't* the Spirit's "voice" hit us as a bit "off," or "counterintuitive" or even downright offensive, at times.

When we sit down and actually pay attention to all the voices within us – our Inner Committee – we often privilege the voices that confirm what we already know, or think we know. Other voices are ushered to the far end of the table.

The far end of the table is precisely where the Spirit most often sits. In my experience, She is perfectly content to stay there until or unless I specifically invite Her to a more prominent position.

Over the centuries, people who pay attention to their inner voices have identified at least nine voices that regularly show up too our internal committee table. Most of these voices are capable of reflecting the will or voice the Spirit. Yet, they may also be at odds with it. Whether these voices are in alignment with the Spirit's will or not, each tends to think you should be following their particular voice.

Thus, getting to know these voices – their various temperaments and convictions, their prejudices, their blind spots, and the places where they see particularly clearly – can be tremendously helpful.

In what follows, I will offer an example of a time when listening for the Spirit's voice convinced me to do, and risk, something that a reasonable person who does not share my beliefs would not necessarily do or risk. In other words, it's an example of a time when even Jeffrey Stout would acknowledge that my faith made a difference.

The risky action I took was applying to serve Niantic Community Church as your Interim Minister when I had specifically stated in my Ministerial Profile that I was ONLY looking for churches on the West Coast.

I'm going to walk you through nine voices that showed up to my internal committee table when I first became aware of your open position, before I ever spoke to the Search Committee. At the end of this sermon, you'll find an attachment that offers greater detail about how these nine archetypal voices tend to manifest within each of us. You'll also find an attachment that goes deeper into how one may discern the Holy Spirit's voice from among the others that compete for our attention and loyalty.

Here is what happened:

In hindsight, I now see that the voice of the Holy Spirit is the first voice I heard. It was just a subtle inkling at first. I definitely didn't recognize it as the Spirit's voice at the time. All I noticed was that when I saw Niantic Community Church listed as one of a long list of churches who were looking for an Interim Minister at the time, your listing held my gaze for reasons I could not explain. Something inside me said, "Oh interesting. You should look into that one." I had no reason to look into your listing since it was on the opposite end of the country. Thus, I continued down the list and found a couple of churches that fit my requirements.

Yet, the NCC listing kept returning to my mind. It didn't – or wouldn't – go away. Finally, I clicked on the NCC link and gave your listing and your website a cursory glance. What I saw intrigued me, then worried me. Worried me precisely because it intrigued me!

It did not take long for the at least nine voices of my Inner Committee to show up to offer their advice. If I could put words to these voices, they said something like this:

The Parent: Are you kidding? You can't consider moving away from your wife, your daughter and son-in-law who just moved stone's throw away from you! And what about your own mother who just moved into the apartment above your garage? Consider your responsibilities as a husband and father, not to mention your responsibilities as a son!

The Free Child: Wait. What?! I spent over thirty years patiently waiting to come home to the Pacific Northwest. If you apply for this job in Niantic, I'm going to throw the mother of all tantrums!

The Pessimist: You just left your church here in Portland because they were so highly abusive. What makes you so sure this church won't treat you the same way? Then you'll be stuck clear on the other side of the country, away from your family and friends. It isn't worth the risk.

The Hero: You've spent long enough helping congregations figure out who they are and what to do in the world. It's time to take things to a new level and step onto a larger stage. You should leave parish ministry and lend your efforts to building a national movement that can take on the challenges of our time.

The Peer Group [Represented by the congregation I had joyfully served for 13 years in Omaha before leaving for Portland]: We were understanding and supportive when you decided to leave us in order to return to your native, Pacific Northwest after so many years. But if you suddenly move back East, we'll be asking, "Why couldn't you have just stayed here in Omaha with us to begin with? You could have saved yourself and us a lot of trouble and pain!"

The Pragmatist: The Niantic Search Committee will probably reject you when they see you are only looking for churches on the West Coast. Then again, it does neither you nor them any real harm to apply. Why not submit your profile and see what happens?

The Adversary/Satan [*From one side of its mouth:*] You shouldn't be applying to this church or any other. God has led you astray. Churches are hopelessly irrelevant these days. They'll just waste your time and life – like the last one did. [*From other side of its mouth:*] You don't deserve to go to another church. You're a horrible minister. You should have gone into solar energy research just as you'd planned before you got this ludicrous notion of becoming a minister. You could have been quite wealthy by now. Why not sell solar panels?

The Holy Spirit (after I did more research): Don't be afraid. Your mind is freaking out right now but your gut is calm. If you pay attention, you're even feeling little sparks of joy for reasons you can't quite put your finger on. The fire of my Spirit resides in this church. You should apply. If they agree to speak to you, I will make my will further known both to you and to them.

My True Self: I do see that this congregation and I could have some fun together. But I'm scared to send them my profile. What if we were to hit it off? This would create a lot of complications in my life and Melanie's. And yet, I really do feel the draw ... I guess it really doesn't hurt to apply. If they want to talk with me, it's not like I'll stop praying or seeking the Spirit's will ...

Once my True Self weighed in, I experienced an almost immediate confirmation that I was taking a step in the right direction. That "still, small voice" of the Spirit acted like gently falling snow. You don't hear snow fall, yet snow subtly changes the acoustics of everything around you. Once I made up my mind to apply for the NCC position, other voices within me who had argued against me applying changed their tune:

The Parent voice said, "Well, you *are* making a responsible decision by keeping all our options open." **The Free Child** said, "I love, love, love the ocean!!" **The Peer Group** said, "You've never been one to simply do what others expect. That's what we love about you!" **The Hero** said, "You've always done well by following the Spirit's Call. If you feel called to go, I'm sure you and the church will do some amazing things." **The Pessimist** said, "I suppose any situation you find yourself in will be better than the one you just left!" **The Holy Spirit** just said, "Amen!"

Once the Search Committee and I started talking and I researched you even more deeply, these voices all got more and more excited, and more confident that the mysterious draw I felt to begin with was from the Spirit.

The only voice that never changed its tune was that of **The Adversary/Satan**. In fact, its unchanging nature is part of what confirmed its dark source. Out of one side of its mouth it tried to artificially inflate my ego, insisting that I'm too good to serve in any church. Out of the other side of its mouth, it insisted that I wasn't good enough to serve any church.

What questions are you pondering in your own life right now?

Why not take some time this week to listen to your own inner committee? Take a few minutes with each voice. Write their advice down in a notebook or journal. Then decide which voice – or voices – need to be seated closer to you at your inner table, and which need to be moved further away.

[Handouts attached.]

SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT: SOME VOICES WITHIN

by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.

- 1) **THE PARENT (conscience)** Stern disciplinarian; you should be more compassionate and considerate of others. Jiminy Cricket – “Let your conscience be your guide” [Note: Conscience and Holy Spirit are often confused with one another.] “You’ll shoot your eye out!” - *A Christmas Story*
- 2) **THE FREE-CHILD (creativity, naïveté)** Inspiring but not always very responsible or realistic. “Come on, live a little!” - *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*
- 3) **THE PEER GROUP (popularity)** Co-workers - friends - best friend - spouse - children - respected sibling. “I was just tryin’ to be a sheep dog.” - *Babe the pig*
- 4) **THE PRAGMATIST (security - survival - here and now)** Practical, worldly-success advisor. Logic - common sense - “As far as I can see . . .” (How far is that?) Boss - lawyer - financial planner - business associate.
- 5) **THE PESSIMIST (shadow – cynic - depression)** Nothing works or lasts – it isn’t worth it. “... if it is a good morning, which I doubt” - Eeyore, *Winnie the Pooh*
- 6) **THE HERO (idealist)** Who are your heroes? “I have a dream ...” – MLK
- 7) **THE ADVERSARY (The Accuser - Satan - liar - short-cut artist)**
Can imitate the wording, but not the tone, of the Spirit’s “voice” (i.e., patience and affirmation, peace, quiet joy) Cannot mimic the Holy Spirit very long - cannot be calm, quiet, with your deepest spiritual self-interest at heart, getting you in tune with God. Often tries to either appeal to ego needs, or denigrate you and convince you you’re no good. Show a little healthy disrespect to this voice within you!
- 8) **THE HOLY SPIRIT (the breath behind your breath)**
God’s appeal is deep and clean and “good” – hard maybe, but beautiful. It is calm – reassuring – no guilt or fear that is not “situation reasonable.” Often provokes a sense of inner peace and/or joy, even if quiet, and even if you’re facing a difficult situation. Like falling snow that is “heard” through changing the acoustics of your surroundings, so the Spirit’s voice often changes the tone, or even the advice, of the other voices within.
- 9) **THE TRUE SELF (the heart within your heart - “Higher Mind”)** Soul – will. You are born with more than you realize (wisdom - archetypes - identity - purpose), but you have to find it – call it forth. Education is for techniques and information; prayer/meditation is for wisdom and truth. Your object is not to become the Holy Spirit, but to allow the Holy Spirit to help you become your truest Self.

Our object is to get the True Self (higher mind - will - soul) into the chairperson’s seat - and keep it there. You cannot control the Holy Spirit, or decide when or what the Spirit will communicate. The Soul will listen – and respond – with much comment from the other voices at times. But if you put your True Self in charge, and getting to know, appreciate, and respect the other voices while not letting them control or bully you, that is what you can do. The rest is up to the Spirit.

Remember: “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” (Einstein)
Listening carefully to your inner voices is a time-tested way of problem-solving through connecting with higher consciousness. You must spend some time alone, in reflection, on a regular basis, if you want to make friends with yourself. If you do this, you will also encounter the One who made you – and Who loves and believes in you more than you love or believe in you – and knows what you are here for.

TEN PRINCIPLES FOR LISTENING TO THAT “STILL, SMALL VOICE”

by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.

- 1) Be willing to hear the Holy Spirit’s voice, and willing to move in whatever direction Spirit leads. This, incidentally, is the hardest part!
- 2) Avoid, as much as humanly possible, being in a rush to decide whether some thought is from Spirit or not. Also avoid like the plague any notion that one must be in a hurry to make a decision based on what one has “heard” in prayer. This is one of the easiest ways to get tripped up (“You must decide right this moment or all is lost ...”). Remember: very small errors can have very large consequences when we are in a rush. God rarely desires or needs us to rush.
- 3) When Spirit is trying to move us in a particular direction, that direction is **ALWAYS** marked by a sense of joy and/or deep peace, however slight, even if the direction involves extreme difficulty, pain, or even death.
- 4) Spirit never asks us to do anything that is against our true self-interest; never asks us to do anything that runs counter to our benefit – even if we are asked to do what the world calls a “selfless act.”
- 5) Spirit normally asks us to move in small steps which cumulatively may be quite large but individually may seem so small as to be insignificant. Spirit rarely asks us to take a giant leap of faith without moving us to the edge of the precipice in very small steps (The only exception I can think of is when we stumble into a situation that endangers us and the Spirit works to “get us out quick”).
- 6) Our intuition is generally sharper than we give it credit for. Provided we’re staying open to the Spirit’s voice (rather than fixating on our fears and prejudices), if we’ve “got a bad feeling” about something, generally it’s accurate. Similarly, if our gut fills with peace and joy – a deep sense of “ah ha!” – we are often on the right track.
- 7) Once you’ve taken a step forward believing it’s where Spirit is calling you, don’t keep second-guessing yourself. Tell Spirit, “I’m going to move with confidence in this direction until or unless you start sending signals to change course.” Then, stay open to those signals in case they come. Spirit normally starts throwing us confirming signals when we’ve made a good decision, though they may not come in the forms we expect.
- 8) Spirit does not use “strange coincidences” as signs nearly as often as Spirit uses gut hunches, “ah ha” moments, deep intuitions, mental images, and just plain old logic (be careful with this one, though, as frequently Spirit’s bidding defies logic, at least until one has the benefit of hindsight).
- 9) Asking “What would Jesus do?” doesn’t get us very far. Spirit is concerned about what **you** should be doing, not Jesus. While Spirit will not call you into un-Christ-like action, the mere fact that Christ did something long ago does not mean Spirit is necessarily calling you to do the same thing. (e.g., Don’t feed the poor just because Christ did. Do something if you sense Spirit calling you to do it and if it does not contradict Christ-like behavior).
- 10) The fact that you have accurately discerned where the Holy Spirit is leading you to go does *not* guarantee the success of whatever it is Spirit is calling you to achieve. Because God respects human freewill, God’s purposes *can* be thwarted by others, in the short-run anyway. Sometimes even God has to switch to “Plan B” (and “C” and ...). Also, be aware that God may have a different end result in mind than you do.