

# The Art of Listening

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Our worship is never an isolated act of devotion but flows out of the context of our lives. Just as our bodies are designed to breathe air, we were made to live in relationship, created to function in communion with God and with other people. It is part of what it means to be made in God's image, and when that image of the Father is visible in our lives, God is glorified.

We are always learning to listen, and in a very real sense are born into conversation. John, in his gospel writes "In the beginning was the Word", echoing the creation story with its repeated refrain of "Then God said", reminding us that we are created and sustained from the overflow of a conversation of love that has continued since before time began. But there is an even deeper mystery: that God, through His Son, has made a way for us to have our lives joined with His, and to add our voices to this conversation in worship. We are invited, without merit, into the most unimaginably life-filled conversation in all eternity.

We are born into conversation. Jesus, when asked, "Who is my neighbor?" makes it clear that my neighbor is not just the person to whom I feel most akin, but anyone to whom I can show mercy and kindness, reminding us that every one of us is born into a community, a society, a world that crackles with fractured conversation. We are thrown, without choice, into the most desperately life-starved conversations in this world.

True worship - worship God says is acceptable to Him - enters fully into both of these conversations. What God expects of us is to "... love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" and also, to "... love your neighbor as yourself." Our obedience is the measure of our love - "If you love Me, keep my commandments" says Jesus, and how do we know what He is asking of us unless we are listening intently to His voice? "Go and do likewise" says Jesus - go and show mercy, have compassion, be a true neighbor - and how do we know where to do this, and how, unless we are listening carefully to the stilted conversations around us, in our towns, our schools, in our offices? And what of in our churches?

Again: we are born into conversation. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, makes it clear that when we are born into new life through Jesus, there are implications that extend far beyond our individual lives. We are born into a new community of people who are at the centre of God's eternal purposes for His creation. God is forming a new society among us as a living picture, a foretaste, of what He intends to do with all of creation, for His glory. We are called to take our places in this new society, to have our conversations and interaction with one another formed by God's living presence with us, called to live lives together that exude the present reality of the God's new kingdom. We are placed, by God's grace, into conversations with one another that can experience deep healing and demonstrate deep wholeness.

There is a phrase sometimes used that "the church exists for the world" - that we as God's family are sent out to demonstrate what we know of His love and wholeness to a hurting and broken world, listening and responding with our lives. But as much as we are the church sent, we are the church gathered. In this sense too "the church exists for the world" - we exist as a community to demonstrate to the world that it is possible for broken, ordinary people to live lives characterized by love; to live lives free of jealousy, greed and selfishness, completely secure in the liberty Jesus has bought for us. The church is to be the place where the world looks to learn what it is to live in the freedom of God's new kingdom. Paul clearly spells out the implications of our being called to be a part of God's eternal purposes:

*"... I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Eph 4:1-3)*

He goes on to expand this, reminding us that unity and purity are to be the characteristics that define our lives together, the hallmarks of all of our conversations as a community of believers.

So we are always learning to listen:

- to God, because He has spoken first, and if we are to respond appropriately in worship we must make every effort to hear Him accurately;

- to the world because we are called to show mercy, and how are we to do that unless we hear its cries for help;
- and to one another in the church, because we all still carry our brokenness and if we are to live in liberty we need to "bear with one another in love."

This is the context of our lives - the context in which we are living as we gather to worship. So our listening begins long before we pick up an instrument and extends far deeper than merely trying to keep in time and play in the right key. Our listening - to God and to one another - forms the shape of our lives. And it is the shape of our lives that determines whether what we do when we gather on a Sunday morning is an expression of worship, something that brings God glory, or an expression of our selfishness, of disunity. God hears our hearts far more loudly than He does the sounds we make.

What then are some of the specifics, how to listen and what fruit to expect to see, in the context of being a part of a worship band at church or in any other setting where God is publicly exalted and worshipped through music? We will look at this in more detail in part two of "The Art of Listening".