

Finding Your *Voice*

HOW TO SPEAK YOUR HEART'S TRUE FAITH



Jim Dant

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Contents



Foreword	xiii
Introduction	xv
Scripture	1
Humanity	31
Salvation	45
God	67
Jesus	89
Holy Spirit	103
Church	129
The World	145
Postlude	163
Discussion Questions	169
Invite Jim	179

Introduction



Everything seems frozen in time. Well, almost everything. The little brick church with the white cinder block fellowship hall seems smaller and worn. A different name follows the word ‘Pastor’ on the little church sign. The field beside the church is now paved. Worn white lines create more spaces than are needed for the smattering of cars and trucks assembled there. I miss the grass that now lies dead beneath the asphalt. This was where I hunted Easter eggs, felt the exhilaration of pushing the accelerator and turning the steering wheel of a red 1969 Chevy pickup truck for the first time, and wiped sweat while pushing a lawnmower to do my service to God. To my adult eyes everything seems smaller. So do the homes that line the streets around it. The streets are narrower than I remember and each block of property seems compressed. But everything else is frozen in time.

I push open the door to the sanctuary of Northside Baptist Church. To the right — in what might be

deemed a vestibule, but is decorated more like a home hallway — is the pastor's study. An old metal sign still says so. The door is locked, but I'm guessing the shelves are now filled with books the new pastor likes to read or look at. I'll bet it still smells as musty as it did when Brother Ready studied there.

A double door entry leads me into the sanctuary. I stop and count. Yep, still 28 pews. As a child I used to count one side then multiply times two as my family made its way to the second pew from the front on the preacher's left. It was our pew.

That pew was a second home for me. I slept, ate, sang, learned, played, laughed, and got whippings there. Yes, whippings. My antics were innocent, but disruptive. During the pastor's sermons, I would often open my Bible to the Song of Songs, lay the Bible in my younger brother's lap and point to a verse which contained the word 'breast.' He would not be able to contain himself and his snickers would earn him the first whipping. Mine would soon follow. During evening services, congregants were often invited to request hymns. Regardless of the season, I would inevitably thrust my hand into the air and request "What Child Is This?" or "Good Christian Men Rejoice." Both songs contained the word 'ass.'

As soon as the word left the mouths of the singing congregants, my younger brother would get whipped for laughing. Then I would get it. When I wasn't perusing the hymnal and Bible for cheap adolescent entertainment, I was attentively following the sermonic thought of my pastor, Brother Ready. I would tenaciously take notes on each of his sermons and dream of preaching the same gospel one day.

The present pastor has a pleasant demeanor and a delightful grin to match. He seems to be a genuine man who fills the role of pastor well. He also uses reading glasses that at the moment he has misplaced. Scanning the congregation of about twenty worshippers, he asks if anyone has seen them. Silence. Rather spontaneously, I offer him mine. He receives them with a smile, slides them along his temples over his ears, rests them at the end of his nose just above the grin and proceeds to lead us in worship. He reads scripture and delivers a sermon through my lenses. These are the slivers of glass through which I read and interpret scripture and through which I observe and engage the world. Even with the same lenses, we see things differently.

There is little difference between his sermon and the sermons I heard as a child, which were primarily

gentle in tone. However, decibel levels were raised when the cross, hell, the devil or the world were mentioned. The faithful twenty who are gathered on this rainy Sunday evening are admonished to submit to God 100%. If we feel we've given any less, we are encouraged to kneel at the altar and pray for the ability to give more. I look around the room. Twenty memories. Twenty people who had been my Sunday School teachers, choir leaders, discipleship directors, surrogate parents, grandparents, and friends. Twenty citizens of an impoverished delta community and a church that by some people's standards has seen better days. Twenty people. I'm glad none of them go to the altar to pray.

While I also do not go to the altar to confess any of my shortcomings or fractional lack of commitment, I will confess here that I wonder. I wonder if these folk would really love me if they knew me. If they knew the lessons I had learned in this place had been renewed, reformed, and in some instances replaced by subsequent lessons along the way. My life has felt anything but frozen in time. The inspired but insulated faith of my childhood has been shaped and at times scarred by education, spirituality programs, the joys and struggles of marriage and parenting,

poker tables, travels, brushes with other cultures and other denominations and other geographic regions, ironman training and a multitude of other life experiences in between. And maybe I've presumed too much about them! Maybe their thoughts and experiences have led them to a much broader and deeper understanding of God than I've relegated to my memory. Maybe, like me, they have felt and thought things they have hesitated to speak in church, speak in the coffee shop, or speak to one another, because it seems contrary to the common vernacular of their faith. I wonder how they will feel about the words of this book.

Following the service, we stand in the aisle of the church. We tell stories, share phone numbers, ask questions, laugh hard and allow ourselves to trickle a few tears. We hold common amazement at how much we love one another — the aging congregation and the prodigal preacher boy who has come home.

What am I doing here, I wonder? I've spent the last three days presenting the substance of this book during a conference at the University Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Finding myself only a few hours from my childhood home — a place I had not seen in more than three decades — I decided to

FINDING YOUR VOICE

drive up and the see the town. Now that I'm here, it suddenly seems important to stay a while.

Scripture



I've decided to write the bulk of this manuscript at the Margaret Tiebel Memorial Library in Eudora, Arkansas. This library was my second home during the years I lived in Eudora and an easy bike ride away from where I lived. Almost every afternoon, I'd check the air in the tires of my gold Spyder bike (banana seat with high handlebars), throw a pack of saltines and my school books in the wire basket affixed to the front of my bike, and ride to the library. Homework was done as quickly as possible and then shelves were perused with my library friends, Kenneth and Cheryl. We'd turn in books from days before and take our newly borrowed books to the swing set outside. No sound but the rhythmic squeaking of chains and the munching of shared saltines could be heard as we buried ourselves in the books.

The swings are gone but the books are still here. As I type these words, I'm less than twenty feet from the favorite pages of my childhood: *Henry Huggins*, *Ellen Tebbits*, *The Sign in the Crooked Arrow* (the best

Hardy Boys book ever), *The Mystery of the Green Ghost* (the best Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators book ever), *The Ghost of Windy Hill*, and *The Incredible Journey*. They are all still here, neatly shelved in alphabetical order ready for another child who wants to be swept away.

No book, however, delighted me more than the Bible. I memorized Bible verses the way some kids collected baseball cards. I read books about the Bible. I memorized the books of the Bible. I kept notebooks and journals of sermons and thoughts that our pastor shared about the Bible. I made sure to read something in the Bible every day. I'll admit it. I was (am) a Bible nerd.

Now here's where it gets weird. It wasn't just the content that drew me. It was also the tactile nature of this sacred book. Most books were limited to a hard-back or paperback presentation. Not the Bible. My dad's Bible had a soft, black, leather cover with the very thinnest of interior pages. They almost felt like the 'onion skin paper' we used for tracing in school. The Good News Version of the Bible was paperback with a newsprint feel. The Living Bible had a green padded cover. Every Bible had a different feel and

texture. I loved the variety of wrappings that held the sacred word.

Cheatham's Drugstore is where Bibles were purchased in Eudora. On the corner of Main Street, in the center of town, the drug store doors opened to a display of Bibles, front and center in the entryway. Every Bible I owned as a child was purchased at the drugstore. And the one Bible I wanted was prominently displayed, but economically out of reach. I already owned a small red gift Bible and a red *Youth for Christ* Bible, complete with a forward by Billy Graham. The former was presented to me by Mrs. Cheatham upon entering the Primary Department of our Sunday School. The latter was presented to me by Mrs. Cheatham when I surrendered to preach. Because the Cheathams owned the drugstore, they presented a lot of Bibles. The one Bible I wanted, however, was a Thompson Chain Reference Study Bible. It was the Bible from which my pastor, Brother Ready, preached.

Six years after moving from Eudora, I was ordained to the gospel ministry at Parkwood Hills Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia. At the conclusion of the ordination service, the church presented me with a leather-bound Thompson Chain Reference

Study Bible that I received with great gratitude and excitement. A large part of me wished Mrs. Cheatham had been there to present it to me.

I now have a shelf full of Bibles. Each is filled with the same story, and yet each has its own story too. Some were gifted by caring individuals. Others were purchased for a particular purpose. A few are sacred souvenirs of holy places and moments in my past. Each and every one has contributed to my life's journey.

For me, the scripture has provided the beginnings of conversations with God, not the end.

My red *Youth for Christ* Bible bears the marks of a faithful teenager's enthusiasm. The cover is worn, predictable verses are underlined or highlighted, favorite sermon quotes are penciled on the blank pages near the cover, and a couple of stickers adorn the exterior. One of those stickers reads, "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." I've heard it said there's nothing more dangerous than a zealous teenager with a Bible!

My earliest view of scripture assumed that the words of holy text were given in order to establish

belief. Within the sixty-six books of my Bible were the answers to every question and the direction for every path. My ability to identify these ‘answers’ and rightly discern these paths was greatly influenced by the most charismatic religious figures in my life. Almost any teacher, preacher, or youth minister that was forceful in their demeanor or entertaining in their approach could draw me in. I was hungry to know and they knew it.

In my young mind, I couldn’t imagine there could be any disagreement over the truth of scripture, particularly as I had learned it and begun to dispense it. It all made sense to me — just as it had been explained to me. As long as I stayed within the parameters of the beliefs delivered to me, the parameters of my limited faith community and the parameters of a fairly untainted life, my understanding of the Bible was more than sufficient. However, when issues outside my limited theological thought were introduced to me in seminary or when I ran head on into an Episcopalian or a Pentecostal or — God forbid — a Jewish person, or when life dealt my parents a divorce, one of my children an addiction, or one of my friends a brain tumor, my certainties about verses were brutally transformed into

argumentative prayers. It was at each of these points my relationship with scripture expanded and I was able to consider approaches to text that differed from that with which I was raised. While foreign to me, the idea of arguing with scripture and praying with scripture had long been part of faith tradition. Within the Jewish tradition, faith is shaped and understood through the aggressive engagement of ideas and arguments. In the history of the church, the sacred reading of scripture was considered a valid avenue of truth — particularly among the saints. In our own era of modern enlightenment, the historical understanding of biblical backgrounds has provided novel, needed, and meaningful insights into the biblical writings.

The assertion ‘the Bible says it and I believe it’ was starting to settle very little if anything. I was beginning to suspect that the Bible was never meant to be a guide for dogma. What if it was not meant to contain the answers that end all arguments? What if the words of scripture were the beginnings of our conversations with God, not the end? What if the Bible is where our arguments with God start instead? Where the path is negotiated, not necessarily revealed. These questions were troubling at times, but troubling

breaths of fresh air. They were filled with life and allowed God to become bigger and bigger and bigger.

I've always been a bit partial to the Book of Leviticus. I'm aware that most Christians fall in love with the psalms, one of the gospels, or a Pauline letter. But I've always been drawn to the corpus of priestly law contained in this oft-neglected book. It is indeed a long and laborious listing of the rituals and rules that dictate the worship and work of the Israelite community. However, nestled within the listing of legal matters is a single narrative. In Leviticus 10, we read the story of the death of two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu. It's actually more than a mere death. They are killed by a God who seems capricious.

According to the text, Aaron's sons are participating in the burning of a sacrificial offering to God. The details of their infraction is unclear, but they do something wrong in the process and the law is not followed. God immediately strikes them dead. After all, the law is clear. There is a prior verse in Leviticus that states exactly how the offering is to be presented to God. They did not give that particular verse adequate attention and God struck them dead. Now, if we ended the story here, the lesson would be

simple — the Bible says it, you better believe it, and that settles it. Do exactly what every verse says or risk a heavenly whammy! This is not the end of the story, however. And it's in the subsequent scene that the role of scripture is more broadly defined for us and questions arise.

Moses summons Aaron after Aaron's sons are killed. Entering the sacrificial scene that is complete with dead animals and dead sons, Moses instructs Aaron to complete the sacrifice. With regard to this particular sacrifice, Aaron is to take a portion of the offering home and enjoy a feast with family and friends. This is the law. There is a verse that says this must be done. And we've already seen what happens when the law is not obeyed! Aaron, however, looks at Moses and basically exclaims, "Are you crazy?!? I've got two dead sons on the floor! I am not going to eat a celebrative feast before God on the day that two of my sons have died!" (My personal translation of the text.) To make sure he is not consumed by the extraneous heat of impending lightning, Moses should be ducking. No lightning comes, however. Moses agrees with Aaron and Aaron departs to bury his sons. The message of the story seems to be two-fold. We should

always take the text seriously, but it also demands a conversation — sometimes an argument.

This was Jesus' way. When confronted with verses about Sabbath, lepers or adulterous persons, there was obvious, prayerful conversation between Jesus and his Father, as well as between Jesus and those around him.

These kinds of conversations are not new for us. We've had these conversations around many issues and we've avoided them with regard to other issues. Few of us destroy our homes when mold is found in a closet or bathroom. According to Levitical law, a single occurrence of mold compels us to scrape down the walls of our homes. A reoccurrence, however, demands the destruction of our homes! Few of us would destroy where we live when mold is found in a closet or bathroom. I've met no one who stones their children to death for disrespectful behavior or stones their neighbor for ignoring the Sabbath. Most of us wear clothing of blended fabric and don't think twice about eating a cheeseburger — both breaches of God's law. Oh yes, there is a verse in the Bible that says these things cannot be done! But we do them, I assume, because we have had some sort of conversation with God. Maybe it was a formal prayer or

maybe it was in the recesses of our mind, but the conversation was engaged just the same. A better understanding of biological and social sciences, as well as, a more personal understanding of God, through Jesus, has allowed us to approach these verses differently. We converse with them and about them. We argue. We respect them, but often relinquish the dominant hold they have had on our lives and the lives of those before us.

However, there are conversations regarding other subjects or laws that we avoid or ignore. Christians continue to pick and choose levitical laws to ‘hold onto’ for the express purpose of condemning others. We are willing to have conversations about the laws we feel might impede our lives and faith, but stringently obligate others to laws that address areas of life that do not pose any particular struggle for us. We act as if some laws are non-negotiable. I would suggest that all laws — in fact, all biblical texts — are the beginning of the conversation, not the end. If there is no ongoing conversation and the verses are eternal ‘rules of law,’ then there is no need for God’s voice. There is no need for prayer, study or even discussion. It has already been said. There is nothing more to say. But, in fact, there is more to be said. Words often

need to be argued with in order to be understood. These conversations are essential to our maturity and faith development.

The scriptures also provide a continued path for faith development and maturity.

Lest I sound too brutal with regard to the simple, dogmatic reading of the text with which I grew up, it is part of the path. It is not, however, the end of the path. Sunday school teachers who taught me to read the text as a concrete document where everything was black and white or right and wrong were giving me exactly what I needed at the time. It was age appropriate for a child in the faith. I was where I needed to be at the time, but I didn't need to stay there!

The Apostle Paul hints at this numerous times in his writings. Writing to the church at Corinth he comments, "When I was a child, I thought like a child. But when I became an adult, I put away childish things." He encouraged the Corinthians to move beyond the 'milk of the gospel' and consume the 'meat of faith.' He told the church in Galatia the law was nothing more than a babysitter for us — a nanny — until we reached maturity in Christ.

The law — the dogmatic, simple reading of scripture — is a part of our faith journey. But it shouldn't be the end.

In Jewish faith, the Hebrew Scriptures are the source for faith development. Their order intentionally aids this process. Christianity's embrace of the Hebrew Scriptures was a natural and wonderful decision. But, rather than transfer the Hebrew Scriptures to our Bible in their traditional order, we rearranged and re-categorized the books. The Hebrew Scriptures are divided into three sections: Law, Prophets and Writings. The books of law are identical to the Protestant Old Testament's books of law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The differences in order and category come with the books that follow. The Hebrew Prophets include most of what we categorize as history in addition to the prophetic books: Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and all of the Protestant Scripture's traditional prophets (major and minor) except for Daniel and Lamentations. The third section of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Writings) includes what we typically categorize as poetry (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) along with some historical books and prophetic writings (Ruth, Esther,

Scripture

Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Daniel, and Lamentations). If you're trying to get this straight in your head, don't think too hard. My only purpose is to highlight Christianity's loss in the rearrangement of these materials.

HEBREW CANON	PROTESTANT CANON
<p><i>TORAH</i></p> <p>Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p>	<p>Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p><i>LAW (Pentateuch)</i></p>
<p><i>PROPHETS</i></p> <p>Joshua Judges I Samuel II Samuel I Kings II Kings Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p>	<p>Joshua Judges Ruth I Samuel II Samuel I Kings II Kings I Chronicles II Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther</p> <p><i>HISTORY</i></p>
	<p>Psalms Job Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon</p> <p><i>POETRY and WISDOM</i></p>
	<p>Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel</p> <p><i>MAJOR PROPHETS</i></p>
<p><i>THE WRITINGS</i></p> <p>Psalms Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Solomon Ecclesiastes Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra Nehemiah I Chronicles II Chronicles</p>	<p>Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p> <p><i>MINOR PROPHETS</i></p>

The simplest argument for our shift in the order of Hebrew Scriptures is that the Christian readers arranged the books by ‘style’ of literature. As previously stated, this was not the criteria for the Jewish arrangement of the books. The Hebrew Scriptures are categorized in the order of their authority, the order of their compilation, and most importantly, the order of their usage in faith development. It is the latter that is of greatest interest to us.

In Jewish faith development, the Law is the starting point. Prior to present day Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, children engage the primary stories of the faith contained in Genesis to Deuteronomy, as well as, the traditional 613 mitzvot or commandments couched in these chapters and verses. It is only after the learning of law — the black and white basics of the faith — that the Prophets are studied. The prophetic literature argues and struggles with the law. Like teenagers questioning the hard and fast rules of their parents, the prophets hammered at and honed the requirements of the law. For instance, in Deuteronomy 23:1-5, the law makes it very clear that no eunuch or Moabite is allowed entrance into the faith community of Israel. This is the law — black and white, right and wrong. However, in Isaiah 56:3-7,

the prophet argues that eunuchs and foreigners are welcomed into God's house — a house of prayer for all people — if they choose to keep Sabbath and hold fast to God's covenant. Then Isaiah, writing from Babylonian exile amid a population of foreigners, has no doubt lived long enough to know that all foreigners aren't bad. There are some really good Moabites and Babylonians outside the faith and some bad ones. Just like there are some good people 'inside' the faith and some bad ones. In Isaiah's mind and writings, the law simply can't be the last word. It is a part of faith development. It is the first step of faith development but not the last. And by the time we get to the Writings section of the Hebrew Scriptures, we read the story of Ruth. Ruth is a Moabite who marries an Israelite and becomes the great grandmother of King David!

By moving Ruth to an historical division of the Christian Scriptures (making Ruth the eighth book of our Old Testament rather than one of the concluding books of the whole corpus of scripture), we lose the significant movement of faith development: no Moabites (the Law), let a good Moabite in the community of faith (the Prophets), marry a Moabite and make them part of the family (the Writings).

This does not mean that the law is ignored. It means that the law has become the backdrop for all decision-making, but is not allowed to be static and oppressive as faith develops in healthy, sensible, and sacred ways.

I have three daughters. When they were pre-schoolers, I stood them all in front of our stove and said (with as much authority as I could muster), “Don’t ever, ever, ever, ever touch this stove. It is hot. It will burn you. It will hurt.” “Remember,” I reiterated and emphasized and exclaimed, “Don’t ever touch this stove.”

A few years later, when my middle school daughters sought to interrupt my ‘television time’ with a request for frozen pizza, I told them to carefully pre-heat the oven, use oven mitts to place the pizza on the middle rack, and when the timer beeped use the mitts to carefully remove the pizza. I must admit, I even dragged myself off the sofa the first couple of times to make sure they were careful.

Today? My daughters are in their mid-twenties. When they come home to visit, I expect them to cook supper! I want them to interact with the stove! This does not mean that my first words to them concerning the stove were meaningless, false, or meant to be forgotten. They will forever handle the stove with

the ‘law’ in the back of their mind. They will forever know that the stove has the capacity to hurt or burn them. They also know, however, that dealing with a stove is part of living as a mature adult. The law is a backdrop for living well with the stove. It was never meant...let me say that again...NEVER MEANT to impede usage of the stove for all time. It was NEVER MEANT to be a rule that oppressed or limited their adult lives. To use the Apostle Paul’s idea, the law was a babysitter — a nanny — until my daughters were old enough and mature enough to live well in the presence of a stove.

The original order of the Hebrew Scriptures allows us to see this process of faith development and affords us a healthy movement from law to life. The law prepares us for the struggle inherent in dealing with Moabites — the ever present other. But life is filled with meaningful and marvelous stories of encounters and relationships with the other — Ruth. The Law tells us that food and sexuality and suffering will challenge our primary love for God. But the Writings — Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs and Job — assure us that these same issues are a part of the rich fabric of life.

This faith development is vividly evident in the life of Jesus. Jesus knew the law concerning Sabbath observance. He argued with the Pharisees about the meaning of those laws. And finally, he lived what seemed to be contrary to the law when he healed on the Sabbath. Jesus knew the law concerning the treatment of lepers — banishment and quarantine. But Jesus touched and loved and healed lepers. Jesus was not disregarding law. The law was always the backdrop from which Jesus made his life decisions. Jesus did not, however, allow the law to dictate his life when life demanded a more graceful path.

The scriptures then are the beginning of a conversation with God that allows for the wonderful process of faith development. Of course, most of our maturing was not guided by a single voice or perspective. Most of us have had numerous teachers, mentors, and guides who prompted us to explore and experience life from multiple perspectives. The same is true with scripture.