

Eídon

A Newsletter on Christian Spirituality for Church Leaders

July 2008

Eyes and Ears

Seeing v. Hearing

I've had a spirituality of hearing for most of my life. The most important body organ after my brain (the physical seat of mind, soul, and what we refer to as the "heart"), has been my two ears.

Christians tend to favor a spirituality of hearing. Consider a typical worship service. Musicians play a musical prelude. As people drag themselves in tardily to find seats, the worship leader stands in front and talks. The congregation sings. Someone tells a story to younger children. Offerings are given, rarely in silence, but generally while an offertory is performed. Scripture is read aloud. The pastor preaches a fifteen- to thirty-minute sermon, after which people sing again. In some non-liturgical and small to medium-sized congregations, individuals share something from their week. Someone leads in spoken prayer. A long string of verbal announcements are uttered. The worship leader or pastor speaks a benediction—which functions partly as a signal for everyone to launch into animated conversation. In worship services our ears work hard to hear speech and sound.

In this we are very Protestant. During the Middle Ages, public worship and private devotion had been oriented around a spirituality of seeing, where one's eyes were the most important organ. Paint-

ings, statues, architectural forms, and above all the mass with its elevation of the host nurtured this spirituality of seeing.

Lutheran and Reformed leaders rejected the visual emphasis of medieval Catholicism. They wanted people to hear the Word of God, pre-eminently expressed through preaching on biblical texts. What mattered was listening to inspired words, not looking at visual forms.

I'm neither interested in resurrecting the Middle Ages nor in eradicating words. After all, I trade in words through preaching, teaching, spiritual guidance, and writing. I'd be in serious trouble if I ditched speaking and hearing.

However, I am interested in taking the Bible seriously—and the Bible, far more than we generally recognize, gives great importance to seeing. Glancing at an analytical concordance shows that Hebrew and Greek words for seeing—*behold, look, see, consider, watch*, and so on—appear approximately 2,300 times in the Bible. Recognizing this could become hugely important as we connect with our visually-oriented culture.

In the New Testament, seeing is most prominent in the gospels. Take John as a test case, where

hearing is clearly important. Greek basically has only one word for hearing (*akouō*), and John uses some form of it 59 times.

Yet this pales in comparison to words for seeing, which appear nearly four times as often. Greek has at least six verbs for seeing (*horaō, eídō, blépō, optánomai, theáomai, and theōréō*) which the gospel of John uses a whopping 223 times. By adding related verbs such

as seeking (*zetéō*) and manifesting (*phanerōō, emphánizō*), the total jumps to 266.

In addition to these verbs, a distinguishing feature of Johannine theology is divine showing and human seeing. Salvation in John does not so much happen through expiatory atonement or substitutionary sacrifice as through revelation: we are saved as we see and accept the manifestation of God in Jesus. Indeed, the crucifixion is Jesus' visible glorification, his lifting up for others to see (3:14, 8:28, 12:32; cf. 1:14).

Salvation and spiritual growth in the Bible partly happen through our eyes, and at a deeper level, through our faculty of spiritual perception. How might a spirituality of seeing take shape? For practices to develop looking, see the other side.



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A Greek verb meaning to see or to perceive, frequently found in the New Testament

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More Practices

If practices like those on this page intrigue you, then you might look into (sorry for that pun!) my small book *Prayer Practices for Terrifically Busy People*. Copies are available through my website; or if you live near Goshen, IN, I may be able to deliver a copy to you. Contact me for details.

Five Practices

Shaping A Spirituality of Seeing

Sooner or later, discussions of Christian spirituality find a path to specific practices. Our practices shape our experiences, and therefore our theology, about living our lives before God. I'd like to outline five contemplative practices that fashion a spirituality of seeing.

1. Imagine yourself into the biblical stories. Unlike residents of first century Palestine, we don't have the privilege of physically seeing the historical Jesus. But by imaginatively inserting ourselves into the stories of scripture, we can see Jesus with our inner eyes.

Select a story from the gospels and read through it once or twice until the storyline is clear. Then with your eyes closed, enter the story so that you become either an observer (such as a member of the crowd) or a participant (such as the woman with hemorrhages in Mk. 5:25ff). Let the story unfold as you watch in your mind's eye. What colors and objects do you see? What facial expressions? As you watch, what do you notice?

If this imaginative seeing is difficult, then make it more immediate by holding an object from the story in your hands. This might be a straw mat, a hem of cloth, a gold coin, myrrh or frankincense. The sensation of touch (or smell) can make the story come alive.

2. Gaze lovingly at creation. For Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), the entire world was suffused with God; and for Bonaventure (d. 1274), creation bore the

vestiges or footprints of God.

Choose a flower, leaf, stone, seashell, feather, or some other object of God's creation, and gaze at it for 10-20 minutes with an attitude of child-like wonder. What detail intrigues you? What feeling, image, or thought does this stir up in you? What might God be communicating to you through it? If your attention wanders (as it probably will), gently refocus your eyes on the object.

A variation of this practice, if you are wealthy enough to travel, is to visit an extreme landscape and look there for footprints of God. Possibilities include Skellig Michael, the Sinai Desert, Mount Everest, or something similar.

3. Look at art. Paintings, photographs, sculpture, or architecture are all good choices. During a recent visit to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, I did this practice in the Neo-Impressionist gallery, but you can also do it using books from your public library.

Find a relatively comfortable position where you can be still in front of the artwork. Create an inner space of awe and look without evaluation at what you see. Notice the overall impression of the work as well as its details. What does it evoke in you, and how does that connect to God?

4. Pray with icons. Icons are significantly more sophisticated, both artistically and spiritually,

than they first appear to the eyes of most Protestants. Icons are carefully calculated to draw the viewer from the mind into the heart, to a level of spiritual perception—indeed, to a level of spiritual communication with God—that lies beyond our ordi-

nary awareness. Much of this is accomplished simply by sustained looking at the icon.



5. Watch people. Since human beings are created in the image of God, watching people has the capacity to be a deeply spiritual process. You can do this in nearly any context: church meetings, ball games, hospitals, or urban housing projects. Thanks to liberation theology, we now realize that God may be found especially among people with few economic means.

Respectful watching is necessary with people so you don't make them feel uncomfortable. In contrast to the lengthy gaze we use with icons, shorter glances are better for living people (unless the person is a good friend or family member). I've found that faces and hands generally work best. What about this person reminds you of God?

Practices of seeing open us to awe, which in turn leads to worship (Is. 6:1-5; Matt. 2:11). When balanced with practices of hearing, looking enriches our lives before God.