

# To Whom Are We Listening?

The primary responsibility of training for missions lies on the shoulders of the trainers and teachers in our educational institutions. But where do they get “the goods” to fulfill their charge? A main factor is listening-listening to the right voice and the correct source

by David J. Hesselgrave

This is still in process. I’ve long since come to the conclusion that unless I write while my thinking is still in process I will never write until I get to the other side and then it will be too late to send a manuscript! For some time I have been thinking about what might happen if, instead of listening to the social scientists and to one another, we Christians would begin to listen seriously to what God has to say about missions in the same way that the people of Josiah’s day listened to what God had to say about his Law. Then I came across David Wells’ recent book *No Place for Truth After Reading* it I found that my thinking was even more “in process” than I had thought! More about that book later.

My tide is: *To Whom Are We Listening?* Of course there is a prior question: “Are we listening at all?” Hopefully as most of us know, it takes little acquaintance with mission materials to understand that as missionary Christians we certainly are in a listening mode. so the pertinent question is, to whom are we listening? To whom are you listening? To whom am I listening? Are we listening to the right source? Are we hastening to God? After all missions is first of all God’s mission.

Whether we listen to God or someone else makes all the difference in the world. Think of our first parents. Both Adam and Eve listened, but both listened to the wrong person. God had spoken, but Eve listened to the serpent. And Adam listened to Eve. When they were asked to give an account for their disobedience, Eve admitted that she had listened to the serpent, and Adam said (in effect), “I listened to the wife you

gave me.” In this case, both listened to the wrong person. They should have listened to God.

History is replete with significant events where God’s people listened either to God or to someone else. This had gigantic consequences not only for them selves, but also for all who have followed them. Let me first point to some critical texts in the Old Testament and show the results of listening to God or listening to someone else. These texts are absolutely fabulous. They need to be read and re-read, and especially applied to the missionary context.

## Old Testament Examples

### *The case of Noah*

The passage in Genesis 6-9, dealing with Noah and his three sons and grand-son, is a case in point. Out of all the people of that generation Noah was singled out for having listened to God. He listened before the flood so he prepared an altar upon exiting the ark. Then God made a covenant with him, not a covenant of human responsibility but of divine commitment (Gen. 8:20-22). Not “if you...” or “if my people...” but “I will...”

Then appear those seemingly enigmatic verses in Gen. 9 where Noah is led to bless and curse various of his offspring. These verses deal with the sensitive issue of race so we tend to neglect the passage. As a consequence we miss the fact that Noah was listening to the voice of God and fore telling blessing as well as cursing. Perhaps Shem and Japheth had listened to God also. In any event, their blessing has had tremendous implications for the history of missions for all nations.

In commenting on the blessings in these verses Erich Sauer not only points to Shem, but also to the place of Japheth and his progeny in the missionary purpose of God. Japheth means “wider” or “make wide.” Sauer traces the history of the Japheth peoples down to Paul and his vision of the man of Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). This is where Paul listened to God, changed his plan, and went west. Sauer notes that this was about the time that Ming-ti, the Emperor of China, sent a mission to India which resulted in the entrance of Buddhism to China (c. A.D. 61-67). He says,

But it is the incomparable significance of that dream-vision in Troas that with it the hour had struck for the bringing of the message of salvation over to Europe, so that now Japhetic Europe was appointed to be...the citadel of the message of the kingdom of heaven...(Sauer, *The Dawn of the World Redemption* p. 79).

Those of us who are somewhat familiar with the history of missions need not be reminded of how missionary expansion has paralleled the exploration of new lands and the circumnavigation of the globe by European peoples. It’s highly unlikely that Noah foresaw this history, but he listened to the God who foreordained it and therefore played a prominent role in both its foretelling and in its realization.

### *Abraham and God’s Promise*

God’s call and promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 has been singled out in almost everything that has ever been written about missions in the Old Testament. There is no point in repeating what has been said. But

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what about the significance of the fact that after ten years in Canaan he listened to Sarah's plan for begetting offspring, was persuaded, took Hagar as his wife, and became the father of Ishmael? Have we thought much about the consequences of Abraham listening to Sarah when he should have listened to God? The consequences run all through Old Testament history, into the New Testament and on into the beginnings of Islam, clear up to the present situation.

Think about: It was not long after Abraham's mistake in listening to Sarah that his grandson Esau also listened to the wrong voice. Then Esau married Ishmael's daughter Mahalath. That set up an alliance between the Ishmaelites and Edomites. The antagonism between those peoples and Israel can be traced clear through the Old Testament to the times of Haggai and Malachi. When the New Testament opens it does so by highlighting a genealogy that excludes two firstborn sons (Ishmael and Esau), and also the opposition of the last independent Edomite (Greek, Idumean) king, Herod, to the Christ child. Toward the close of the gospels there is the record of the repudiation of Jesus by one of Herod's sons who mocked him, had him flogged, and sent him back to Pilate to be sentenced to death.

As we know, Muslims point back to Abraham as the father of their faith through Ishmael. They point to many characteristics that Muhammad shared with Ishmael and Esau as proof of his his this-worldly cunning and accomplishments. From beginning to end, Islam is a religion of the flesh. We desperately need to think through these implications for missions to Muslims. Yet we of ten pass them by. In any event, it all started when Abraham, "the man of faith," listened to the wrong voice.

### *Jeremiah and the mortgaged field*

Jeremiah was a realist. Frequently, realists are confused with pessimists. Pessimists are almost univer-

sally disliked and often end up in prison. Jeremiah was under king Zedekiah.

If Jeremiah would have listened to the king he could have gone Scot free. But he listened to the King of Kings and was sent to prison. We find this priceless story in Jeremiah 32.

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## There is a deep and abiding connection between obedience to the Great Commission—that whole of it, not just the going of it—and listening to God's voice in the entire Bible.

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We see the Lord say to Jeremiah, "Now I'm going to send you your nephew Hanamel, and this is what I want you to do." Hanamel visited Jeremiah and told him about a field that needed to be redeemed by someone in the extended family. Jeremiah had listened to the Lord so he agreed to redeem it. Seventeen shekels of silver were paid, the transaction was recorded on scrolls, and witnessed by the elders. Then the scrolls were placed in a jar.

Now from a purely human perspective none of this makes any sense. The people are going into captivity in Babylon. Who needs the field? Why not save the shekels? Perhaps it can be used to good advantage in the tough times just ahead. Yet Jeremiah redeemed the field. Why? Because he listened to the One who said, "Nebuchadnezzar will be victorious. My people are going into captivity. But the time will come when I will bring a remnant back to this land. Believe it, write about it, act on it, redeem the field." You see, redeeming the field was a signal to the people of that time, and of all times, that Jeremiah had heard the voice of God. He had made an investment in the promised

future.

Jeremiah and the scrolls reflect that great transaction between God the Father and the Son when the Father said, "Ask of me and I will give you the heathen (nations) for your inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession" (Ps. 2:8). They were harbingers of the day when

Jesus hung on the cross and declared, "*Tetetestai*" "It is finished; it's paid in full."

This whole episode prefigured the day revealed in Revelation 5 when the Lamb/Lion will break the seal of a scroll no one else can open. Then will begin those judgments that will reclaim the whole earth.

God's redeemed from all tribes, tongues, peoples, and nations—the Spirit is a missiologist *par excellence*—will join voices in a triumph of praise that will "out-Handel" Handel. They'll sing, "With your blood you purchased men for God...Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing!"

Jeremiah listened to God. He did some weeping too. But that's all right. It may take centuries, even millennia. But hearers will become beholders. Weepers will be reapers. Jeremiah knew all about that so he made an investment in a future that only God himself would secure.

### **New Testament Examples**

#### *Jesus and His Disciples*

Very early in the gospels, before Jesus began his ministry, he was found in the temple. When his parents questioned him he responded, "Don't you understand that I must be about my Father's business?" Then he accompanied them back to Nazareth and was subject to his earthly father and mother for almost twenty years. But all through those years he was listening to the voice of that "other Father." That's why, when he was tempted to listen to

Satan he could respond, "It is written...:That;s why, when in the Garden, he would pray, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine he done."

There is a deep and abiding connection between obedience to the Great Commission the whole of it, not just the going of it—and listening to God's voice in the entire Bible.

Following the crucifixion, Cleopas and his friend were "down in the mouth," walking toward Emmaus. The Lord Jesus opened the Scriptures so they could hear what God had said about Christ through the O.T. prophets. The result was "holy heart-burn." When the disciples met that same Easter Sunday night, undoubtedly they asked each other what all of this meant, and what their next move should be. Again Jesus appeared and instructed them from the Scriptures. The result was that they could hardly believe for the joy that overwhelmed them.

Now all of these disciples had had the Scriptures all the time. But somehow they had been so taken with the words and works of Jesus that they had neglected to listen to what God had spoken through the O.T. Scriptures. That was a huge mistake. Robbed of his physical presence and audible voice they became confused and despondent. They were right in listening to Jesus. They were wrong in not listening to all that God had spoken. That is an extremely important point for contemporaries who are strongly (and strangely) tempted to base evangelism and missions on a few proof texts.

There can be little doubt that Peter occupies a special place in the gospels and in the book of Acts. The episode in Caesarea Philippi when Peter made his great confession (Matt. 16:11-20) helps to explain this. Upon his confession Jesus said, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Then follows the promise of the building of the church and the giving of the keys of the kingdom.

This certainly is not the time or place to undertake an involved inquiry as to the significance of Jesus' response.

Personally, I think that our Roman Catholic friends have read too much into it. But it may also be that some of us Protestants have not done it justice either. It seems that something more than just the

Peter, the Spirit's encouragement of Peter after the vision, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the effect of the reception of the Spirit in the accompanying speaking with tongues. This all shows what great weight attaches to this event; and the great significance the historian ascribes to it as shown by his detailed account. *The Triumph of the Crucified*, p.72.

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## Of what lasting value are our strategies, statistics, and scenarios of the future unless God's people understand the nature of spiritual conflict, the meaning of lostness, and the profundity of the divine plan?

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*The Church at Antioch and Jerusalem*

Out of the multiple New Testament illustrations that could be cited, let's focus on two churches in particular. First the church at Antioch: The members were having a prayer meeting (Acts 13:1 - 4).

confession of "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" was involved. Peter was only a stone to be sure. But Pentecost made him a rock. The apostle with the big mouth developed some hearing ears. After that when Peter spoke it was different. So it would seem that it was not just Peter's confession that Christ had in mind when the Lord spoke of the building of the church and the keys of the kingdom. Peter himself was involved in a special way.

The record speaks for itself. Who proclaimed God's Word to all those diverse people on Pentecost? Who was it that the Holy Spirit sent to Cornelius's household? Who stood up in that first mission conference in Jerusalem when Paul's mission was on trial, and testified that he was present when God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles? Great things happened for the church and missions when Peter listened to God the Lord. Concerning just one of these episodes, Eric Sauer writes,

The events themselves show a striking array of supernatural happenings: the vision of Cornelius, the triple vision of

That's where they heard that voice of the Spirit. I am not persuaded that they heard an audible voice from heaven. I think that they were talking to each other as well as to God. Someone probably said something like this, "Look what God is doing here in Antioch! Now how about those who have gone away from us? How about the business people who've been here and are now over in Cypress, and beyond? How about our relatives?" Then someone might have added, "It doesn't make sense does it? Here we are sharing in the blessings of the gospel. But what about people in other places?"

So, as they deliberated and prayed, the Holy Spirit led them to send out Barnabas and Paul. When these missionaries returned after their first term of service they had tremendous experiences to share. But when the news reached the Jerusalem church it occasioned problems. To be sure, we don't remember the Jerusalem church as a great mission.

When there was a possibility that the mission to the Gentiles would be aborted, they listened to Peter as he shared his experience in Cornelius's home. Perhaps even

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more important was the counsel of James. With other disciples he had learned his lesson. He went back to the Old Testament and said, "Now, let's listen to what Isaiah had to say about this matter!" There it was. A mission to the Gentiles from the O.T. Those leaders listened to the voice of God. That settled the matter. Paul's mission to the Gentiles was vindicated.

We need more prayer meetings like that prayer meeting in Antioch. We need more missionary conferences like the conference in Jerusalem. Church leaders in Antioch, and Jerusalem wrestled with the tough questions, and got their answers from God. Think of the results of their listening. Imagine what the results might have been if they had not listened. But imagine the results that would occur if the leaders of all churches would pray, and deliberate, and listen as they did in Antioch and Jerusalem.

### Contemporary Evangelicalism

The history of Christianity is replete with events when certain men and women listened to what God had to say and obeyed Him. History was changed, not just for them, but for all of us as their progeny. But what about our contemporary churches, and especially those of the evangelical movement? Where do we find ourselves?

When I was very small my parents attended a church that was liberal to the core, I still remember how, as a small child, I heard my mother talk about the Ladies' Aid, and how no one bothered to carry a Bible. Ladies' Aid was little more than a supplement to the local newspaper which, as I recall, was a weekly publication. Discussions revolved around what So-and-So had said or was doing. Little wonder that later on when preparing for the ministry I determined that I would have little, or nothing to do with a Ladies' Aid Society in any church I might pastor. Imagine my surprise when in my first church I found that there was a Woman's Missionary Society that was really aiding everyone, and all around the world!

When my parents were converted we moved from that liberal church to a fundamentalistic one—the fundamental kind of fundamentalistic church. Then in the early years of my ministry the evangelical movement as we know it took shape. I remember it as a reaction to both the old liberalism of my childhood, and the highly separatistic fundamentalism of my youth. The watershed was the authority of Scripture. What the Bible said, God said. That was the essence of it. Later on evangelicals got into debates about inerrancy, inspiration, and the nature of biblical authority. Don't misunderstand. Those debates were and are important. They have to do with the kind of authority resident in Scripture. But I have a suspicion that some of us were giving more attention to the fact that God had indeed spoken in Scripture than we were to listening and obeying what he actually said and was saying in Scripture.

Then came the home Bible study movement that is still so much a part of the evangelical agenda. It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of the home Bible studies. I find them almost everywhere I go. But here again there is a listening problem.

Some time ago I read a directive to leaders of home Bible studies. It included a rather startling statement. It said in effect, "No matter how participants interpret the text, don't tell them that they are wrong. If their interpretation is meaningful to them it may be meaningful to someone else." Think about that. If we are to decide which translation of the Bible is best on the basis that "it speaks to me," and what the text means on the basis that "this is what it says to me," as a matter of fact, are we not in danger of hearing the echo of our own partiality rather than the voice of God?

Look at our Sunday Schools particularly the young people, and adult departments. The children still get Bible stories, but what about the rest of us? Enter the foyer and look at the line-up of classes:

"How to be happy though married"; "How to raise little cherubs so they'll be more like Christians and less like animals" or a class on "Budgeting for Christians." Then there also is a study on Ephesians. It's explained, of course, that if any one is interested, they'll have to go down into the furnace room. Now, I realize that this is hyperbole. And of course, there may be value in all of these classes. But I wish that the Sunday School had been called Bible School from the beginning. It used to be called that, but I fear that at some point, in rather recent times, it has become more of a "How To" School than a Bible School.

There are still other indications in evangelical churches of the current propensity for listening to voices other than the voice of God. James Hunter, David Wells, and others have documented them. They include such things as consumerism and church marketing; disregard for doctrine and the coronation of experience. Another fact is the priority given to experimentation and entertainment in church programs. Please do not mistake my intention. I'm not outlining the "rise and fall" of evangelicalism. The seeds of the contemporary problems may have been present in the very origins of the movement. If so, an earlier generation is in no position to do more than encourage all, older as well as younger, to take the Bible much more seriously. It's crucial that we really listen to God so that we may make a difference in our times in the post-modern world in which we live and barely survive.

### Missions and Missiology

Finally, we turn specifically to the ways in which men and women of missions in modern times have responded to God's Word. It took over 200 years for Protestants to recover the applicability of the Great Commission. Later, as its applicability was largely assured, for another 200 years we tended to hang missions on the single peg of the Great Commission, and a few other related proof texts. Evangelicals (i.e., all of us of an evangelical mind and heart) have generally been in the forefront

when it comes to listening to the command of Christ, and challenging the church of successive generations to fulfill the Great Commission. That is all to the good, but it is not enough, nor is it the whole story.

As I see it, there is an extremely serious problem in contemporary missions missiology, including the evangelical variety. It is two-sided problem: On the one hand, we overrate the findings of the social scientists, and our ability to make those findings work in the interest of world evangelization. On the other hand, we underrate the significance of Biblical theology and doctrine, and their importance in both motivating the Church to missions and managing the materials of science. Put very simply, we listen too intently to secular theorists and strategy experts while listening only spasmodically to God himself.

It seems that if you really want to make a mark for yourself as a missiologist, you need to discover something new and germane in one of the social sciences. Next, you need to convert it into missiological terms, and then weave it into a mission analysis and strategy. It is no secret that many Third World leaders now have deep reservations about strategies initiated in North America. For a generation or more we have exported one master strategy after another crusade evangelism, like, Evangelism-in-Depth, Church Growth, Theological Education by Extension, missionary teams, stylized personal witness, electronic media evangelism, and other pro grams and plans. Examine them, and more often than not, you will discover that they represent a reaction against a "failed" strategy of the past, (often of a most recent past). For my part, I believe many of these "master strategies" do have validity and some usefulness. Given the right time, place, and people they can make their contribution. But they are only "part strategies." No one of them constitutes The key to world evangelization. The components of a "Master Strategy" must come

from the Master himself. Only as we search the Scriptures, and listen to what God has to say, will we discover the essentials of Christian ministry and missions to the world.

An illustration of our two-sided problem is seen in David Wells' recent book *No Place for Truth*. From many

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relevant passages in this great book, allow me to choose one in which he describes the state of contemporary theological education which directly relates to the theme at hand.

Concerning the fragmentation of knowledge Wells writes,

Subjects and fields develop their own literatures, working assumptions, vocabularies, technical terms, criteria for what is true and false, and canons of what literature and what views should be common knowledge among those working in the subjects. The result of this is a profound increase in knowledge but often an equally profound loss in understanding what it all means, how it is all interconnected, and how knowledge in one field should inform, that in another. This is the bane of every seminarian's existence. The dissociated fields Biblical studies, theology, church history, homiletics, ethics, pastoral psychology, missiology become a rain of hard pellets relentlessly bombarding those who are on the pilgrimage to graduation. Students are left more or less

defenseless as they run this gauntlet, supplied with little help in their efforts to relate one field to another. In the end, the only warrant for their having to endure the onslaught is that somehow and someday it will all come together in a church. (1992:244-245, Zondervan).

Wells is speaking of theological education in general, but he specifically includes

missiology. He is right! It applies to missiology as much as to any other discipline. Perhaps even more so. We need to remind ourselves that what God says on any given subject must have our listening ear and receive first priority. All else must be evaluated in the light of what He says, and be subservient to it.

Of what lasting value are our strategies, statistics, and scenarios of the future unless God's people understand the nature of spiritual conflict, the meaning of lostness, and the profundity of the divine plan? As my colleague, Paul Hiebert has often said, "*It is possible to carry on missions with poor anthropology, but missions is impossible with bad theology.*"

So as not to leave you with a one-sided picture, let me refer you to just two or three of a number of contemporary ministries that grow out of an intensive integrated application of Scripture to the work of church and missions.

Harry Wendt is a Lutheran theologian who came from New Zealand to America. He surveyed Lutheranism in the U.S. and concluded that the churches are made up of good people, but people who are biblically illiterate. He spent thousands of dollars that he couldn't really afford in order to develop a Bible study series called *The Divine Drama* and founded Crossways International. The series is for adults because Wendt believed, and still does, that if Christian adults don't know the Bible there is no way they can teach it to their chil-

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dren. Interestingly enough, Wendt has been invited to Korea many times and has taught the course to thousands of Korean Christians. Not a few Korean mission leaders have been so impressed that they have decided to make *The Divine Drama* central to their foreign mission evangelistic/discipling strategy.

Also I think of Trevor McIlwaine and the New Tribes Mission. I clearly remember when the founder of the New Tribes Mission came to our seminary in the 1940's. He had tremendous vision. He seemed to feel that anyone who could quote John 3:16 was qualified to go to the mission field. That included almost all of us! He believed that missionary work was so simple that anyone could go, young or old, both the healthy and the infirm.

A generation later McIlwaine went to work among the Palowanos in the Philippines. He found a pretty sad situation. Missionaries and Palowano nationals began to look at the whole of Scripture and listen to what God had to say, not just in a few texts, but in the entire Bible. The Palowano church was revived and revolutionized, and so was New Tribes Mission strategy. In a little more than one generation that mission has gone from a "John 3:16 strategy" to the Great Commission strategy of teaching all things the Lord commanded, including from the O.T. It truly is one of the great stories of modern missions.

Then there is the new external M.A. that a trusted colleague, Ralph D. Winter, and his team are developing. It is not yet completed, but the first quarter of it based on the Old Testament was sent to me recently. It addresses very pointedly the kind of fragmentation David Wells decries. In this program, the student can study the findings of anthropologists, astronomers, geologists, historians, psychologists, and so on, all set in the context of biblical theology beginning with Genesis and

following the unfolding revelation and divine drama of the ages. You can't study more than a few pages before you are confronted with the voice of God. There is no way one can listen to the voice of God and escape the divine mission. That is Christian education par excellence.

### Conclusion

Before we conclude, let's turn to John the Beloved, in the first chapter of Revelation. He says, in effect: "I saw the glorified Son of God, and this is what He is like." He also says: "I listened to the Son and this is what He said to write to the churches." Then he proceeds to write divinely-inspired letters to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and so on. Some of what God had him write is pretty severe. Unless we were absolutely sure that letters such as those were really from God, most churches today would consign them to the wastebasket. They contain disturbing accusations and ominous warnings. But of course, if you listen, they contain hopeful promises that can truly change us.

A most interesting feature of those letters is that at the close of every one of them John is inspired to write, "He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Some exegetes think that the seven churches represent seven periods in the history of the Christian church. Be that as it may, there are some remarkable similarities between the seventh church (at Laodicea), and many churches today. One of the things that the Spirit says to that church is, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:19-20 NW).

In our better moments we realize that this is not a salvation verse. It's rather a

fellowship verse. It's what those disciples experienced when they traveled to Emmaus that first Easter Sunday. They invited Jesus in for food and fellowship. Think of the change it made in them! But don't wait for a business meeting and then make a motion that Jesus be invited in. It doesn't happen that way. A prayer meeting is the more likely place, like the one they had in the church in Antioch. Or a mission conference is a more likely place. A conference where the people hear, not just the voice of the missionaries and missiologists, but the voice of God. A conference like the one they had in Jerusalem.

A.T. Pierson longed for something like that to happen in the mid-1890's so that the world could be evangelized in his life time. It didn't happen. At least it didn't happen in enough churches. We need to pray that something like that will happen today. It could happen. I'm encouraged that it will happen at some point. But amidst all our church entertainment, and mission activism there really is a great hunger in our churches to hear from God. If we do hear from Him, nothing is impossible. It's my conviction that unless we get back to a biblical missiology, there is little hope for fueling and refueling a motivation for those on the frontiers who have not heard. It's not that the peoples at the remotest frontiers can not be reached. At some point they surely will! How do we know? Because after warning us to neither add to, nor take away from Scripture, our Lord says that He is coming soon (Rev. 22:20a). He already had said that the gospel would be proclaimed in all the world as a witness to all the *ethne* (Matt. 24:14).

And so, with the apostle John we first listen to the voice of the Spirit of God, and then we pray. It is a missionary prayer! "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20b).

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