

Faith and Hearing

By Jake Torenvliet

2 Timothy 3:16-4:4

Romans 10:17

Every once in a while you hear something different, something intriguing on the radio. A few months ago I happened to hear a documentary called “The Wounded Healer” on CBC Radio 2. It was a biography about Lucien Larré, a Roman Catholic priest. My interest was due in part to the fascinating and controversial history of Larré’s life and work. But it was especially Larré’s reference to Romans 10:17 early in one of the interviews that piqued my attention: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” It’s not every day that you hear Scripture being quoted in a positive way on CBC. It’s not every day that CBC references a classic proof text for “the means of grace.”

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

Romans 10:17

The “means of grace” classically defined are the ordinary means that God chooses to use in the creation and the confirmation of faith: preaching and sacraments. Echoing Romans 10:17 and other texts, the Heidelberg Catechism states, in QA 65: “[W]here does this faith come from? From the Holy Spirit who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.”

So with Romans 10:17 in the back of my mind I began thinking of ways in which the topic being

discussed in the context of the documentary could be compared to the Spirit’s use of preaching in creating and confirming faith in the lives of believers. But first, Lucien Larré. Who is he and what did he do?

Lucien Larré was born in Saskatchewan in 1933. Not only is Larré a priest, but he also holds a doctorate in clinical psychology. This is really what has made him so (in)famous. For years he worked with troubled youth, earning him the Order of Canada in 1983. In 1992, however, he was charged with 11 counts of abusing children that were in his care. Although 9 of the charges were dropped and he eventually received a pardon in 1997 that cloud from his past still hangs over him—to the point that the BC College of Psychologists suspended his license in 2006.

The first part of the documentary focused on Larré’s work with learning disabled children. Although the children he worked with often looked ordinary they had trouble reading, writing and speaking— they were intelligent. The teachers recognized this and so their report cards would often have comments like “Not working to full potential!” The problem, however, wasn’t their work ethic. It was their hearing. They were listening, but they couldn’t hear properly. Their ears were unable to distinguish between certain sounds. Similarly, Larré described children who exhibited autistic-like behaviours: anti-social, non-communicative.¹ Again, the reason they weren’t communicating was because sound was a blur. They heard things, but they couldn’t understand it. Therefore they lived inside their heads rather than in the world of sound and speech.

To address these issues, Larré used a device

¹ Larré was quick to point out that these children only appeared autistic.

called “the electronic ear”—an invention based on the work of a French audiologist Dr. Alfred Tomatis. One time, Larré says that he showed a printout of his personal hearing test to Tomatis. Tomatis could read it like you and I would read a book. Tomatis said (this is a direct quote), “Oh dear, it looks like you’ve got difficulties with your stomach.” And I said, “Yes, I have bleeding ulcers.” I was kind of shocked by that. And he said, “Oh yes, there’s a kind of dip over here that represents ulcers.” And then he said, “Oh dear,” and he looked some more and said, “What’s wrong with your neck? Your neck is bad.” I said, “Yes, I’m waiting for surgery because I have a very bad problem in my neck and there’s a pinched nerve there...” And he said, “Oh no, we won’t have to do that. We can make a little program and we can help those muscles to relax so that things will be better.” And I was just amazed by that, that he had picked up that I had trouble in my stomach and trouble in my neck. And then he said, “Oh, oh dear, you didn’t have a very good relationship with your father.” He could tell that. And I said, “Well, actually I didn’t really have a father because when I was three months old my father passed away, so I never knew my father.” He said, “Oh you can see that over here. And that has an effect on your life, of course.” And I was just astounded at how much he could tell from the way I listened to sound.”

The electronic ear developed by Tomatis and used by Larré is a device that takes musical pieces like Mozart or Gregorian chant and reshapes them by means of filters, amplifiers and sophisticated gating mechanisms. Then these modified musical pieces are presented to the ears of patients in rapidly alternating forms. Especially between high and low frequencies. The theory behind these exercises has to do with how the ear responds to different frequencies. When one listens to high pitched frequencies it forces the inner ear to tighten, similar to the skin over a drum. In this way the brain can decode the sound. The opposite is true for low frequency, the skin needs to be looser, more supple. Almost like an eye

focusing on near and far objects. This music therapy is like doing physical therapy to the inner ear by way of isolating the frequencies and sounds.

Larré’s young patients were also required to listen to these specialized recordings for a number of minutes every day. The results of these exercises were often astounding. For some children who exhibited autistic-like symptoms, they began to come out of their heads. Gradually as their inner ear became better at focused hearing they were able to interact more with those around them. Similarly, children who had exhibited learning disabilities began to improve at school. All of this was connected to the way they heard sound.

I think there are comparisons we can draw between the world of music therapy for hearing difficulties and the Holy Spirit’s use of the Word in the lives of believers. In a way, because of sin, we all have hearing damage. Because of Adam and Eve’s rebellion we are no longer able to hear the Word of God in the way he intended it to be heard. In fact we refuse to hear his Word in our lives. As a result, we miss the essence and purpose of why we were created. We have a distorted sense of reality. Even though God’s invisible attributes are evident in creation, we refuse to acknowledge him. Not only do we misunderstand the purpose for which we were created, but we muddle our way through life, in our relationships with God and our neighbours. (CoD 3/4.4, Rom. 1:18-32) As sinners we function almost autistic-like; our behaviour is anti-God and anti-neighbour: anti-communion. We don’t love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul and mind, nor do we love our neighbour as ourselves.

It’s only when the Word of God is held up as a mirror in our lives, almost like Lucien Larré’s hearing test, that the damage of sin in our lives becomes evident. We may not have stomach ulcers, or cricks in our necks, but our damaged

hearing is certainly connected to Father issues and hearts that have become stone (Ezk. 36). Consequently, when we hear the voice of God, we cannot understand it, nor do we desire to move toward it (CoD 3/4.5). In fact, we'd prefer to hear something else altogether (2 Timothy 4:1-4)!

But Scripture, the Word of God, is more than a mirror for our damaged hearts. It also contains the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes (CoD 3/4.6; Rom 1:16). The Holy Spirit uses it as a means of grace, as "soul therapy," as a means of repairing, regenerating, refashioning our dysfunctional hearing and hearts. In a way that's analogous to the electronic ear used for hearing impaired children - the Holy Spirit uses the Word to create and confirm faith. When we listen to the preaching of the Word, or meditate on passages of Scripture, the Holy Spirit works in us so that we can rightly discern good from evil, righteousness from wickedness. But this is a lifelong process. We cannot simply spend a few minutes each day for a span of one month immersed in the Word. No, unlike Tomatis' electronic ear, we require the Holy Spirit's soul therapy every day of our lives. Without it, we will relapse and our hearing and hearts will be negatively affected.

For this reason we should avail ourselves of these means as often as we can. Why? Because it is through the preaching and the sacraments that the Holy Spirit does something infinitely greater than correcting physical hearing. Although we may become enamoured by music therapists like Larré or Tomatis, in his wisdom God has determined to use ordinary preachers to convey the wonderful message of salvation and reconciliation: the preaching of Christ crucified. This is the ultimate solution to the world's problems, both physical and spiritual. "He who has ears, let him hear!"



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