

# HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD:

## TESTING THE SPIRITS

by Keith Parker

Our Lord Jesus in Matthew 24 admonishes us about this matter in connection with the impending destruction of Jerusalem, his return and the end of the age. When the disciples asked him about when these events will take place his response was not to answer their question directly, but to warn against deception. He speaks of two sources of deception which will come to his followers.

The first one will be people claiming to be the Christ (the Messiah) (Matthew 24:5). Maybe the first would have been more dangerous before AD70, when some believers may have been expecting that the Messiah might come imminently.

The second source is false prophets (24:11). Once it became clear that Christ did not return when Jerusalem was destroyed, general false prophecy became the danger. Examples would be those who were saying that the resurrection is past already and were overthrowing the faith of some, and those who said that the return of Christ was imminent, whereas Paul said that the man of sin had to come first.

The apostle Peter in his second epistle gives the same warning as Jesus does (2 Peter 2:1), where he makes *false prophets* under the Old Covenant equivalent to *false teachers* in the church. You cannot really separate false prophecy from false doctrine.

False prophecy leads to our being deceived. It can bring about several possible reactions.

If the prophet's predictions do not happen we may try to defend him by reinterpreting him, i.e. 'he didn't really mean that'. We can have a vested interest in defending false prophets, to save face and avoid the humiliation of admitting we were taken in. In fact we may really like and respect a personality and be reluctant to expose his words and teaching to scrutiny in the light of scripture. Even if his prophecy was wrong and seen to be wrong some teachers say that 'we don't get it right all the time' and therefore we just have to wait for the next prophecy, which may be right!!

If the false prophet's predictions do turn out actually to happen we may give credence to other things he says and come to accept false doctrine, which could endanger our souls.

## OLD TESTAMENT REALITY

We have two rules of thumb given us by Moses concerning false prophets.

In Deuteronomy 13 he speaks of a false prophet, whose prediction comes to pass, and on top of that he entices Israel to follow false gods. Such a prophet is to be rejected out of hand despite the apparent truth of his predictions. This is the kind of false prophet, whom we should be able to detect with ease.

In Deuteronomy 18 Moses speaks of a *special Prophet* whom God will raise up, whom they should pay attention to. No doubt such men as Elijah, Isaiah and so on were a partial fulfilment of this, but ultimately it means *the Messiah himself*. However Moses also warns of the kind of prophet '*who shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak*', and he says we shall know him by the fact that his word does not come to pass.

When you look at the true prophets of the Old Covenant, they were not all that thick on the ground, were they? In fact the number of false prophets, who claimed to be speaking in the name of Jehovah, was legion. You have only to look at the 400 men who prophesied lies in the name of the LORD, and the solitary true prophet, Micaiah, who spoke the truth, to see this (1 Kings 22).

## NEW TESTAMENT REALITY

In the church today we have some very obvious examples of false prophets and teachers, who are misleading God's people. I understand there is something called 'the God Channel' on Christian TV, which perhaps has more than its fair share of these people. Are Christians, who just don't get good teaching in their churches turning to these dried up wells instead of themselves

searching the scriptures daily as the Jews of Berea did (Acts 17:10-12)?

But the really difficult area where we need discernment is where we have people, who in other respects are sound in doctrine, but make predictions which they expect others to believe. The disturbing thing is that some Christians seem to regard the words of such men (and women) as if they were as unquestionable as the Bible itself.

How do we judge or weigh the prophecies and/or teachings which are served up to us today? Paul encourages us to 'judge' prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:29). Part of judging is to measure what is said against the plumb line of the teachings of Christ and his apostles. When Paul was writing to the Corinthians the NT was in the process of being written, and therefore believers did not have the advantage that we now have of being able to compare scripture with scripture and so hammer out what the truth really is.

**Here are a few questions we ought to ask whenever we are faced with claimed prophecies:**

1. Do we know the prophet/teacher, and does he come out of a background that we can trust?
2. Has he made any statements in the past that we can check for reliability? Moses says that if his word does not come to pass, we need not worry about that prophet. This principle would enable us to rule out a lot of false claimants, and save us unnecessary work!
3. Are we giving credence to his words just because we like and trust him? This is a very subjective way of going on. It is possible to be a nice guy and still be wrong!

4. Are his words in line with scripture? Come to think of it, we don't need an awful lot outside of the Bible, do we? Anything extra we need is in the nature of encouragement and up-building.
5. Do they add to what the inspired apostles of Christ have taught us? Look at what John says in his second epistle, verses 9 & 10, where he tells us to 'abide in the doctrine of Christ', that is not to expect additions which will in some way improve what we already have.
6. Do they tickle our ears? Really this is a question which challenges us as to whether we are always desirous to hear some 'inspired' utterance.
7. Are they couched in such a way that they demand our credence? Do they make us feel that to question them is to question God?

8. Do they encourage us to trust and hope in the Lord and in his revealed word in the Bible?

In the light of all this may I suggest two healthy attitudes? The first is to have a firm Christian scepticism about human claims to inspiration, and not accept them easily. The second is to be much in the word of God.

I understand that the way people are trained to spot forged banknotes is to study diligently genuine currency. Spending too much time studying false teachings has its dangers: because we are just human it is possible for us to be drawn in by the falsehoods we are trying to oppose, but if we are soaked in the truth of scripture we are more likely to spot the bogus.