

Hearing God's Voice: Evaluating Some Popular Teachings on the Subject

Callie Joubert and Nick Maartens

Abstract

Hearing the voice of God is for many Christians part of their everyday life and undoubtedly biblical. But what exactly do they mean by 'hearing God's voice' and how do they distinguish between God's voice, their own thoughts or feelings and other voices? To assess whether certain ways in which some claim to be 'hearing God's voice' are scriptural, this paper presents the results of three studies conducted by researchers who have investigated the phenomenon. It then focuses on some of the things Christians are being taught about God's voice, which are nothing less than confusing and often unbiblical. The third section comprises a response to two widely accepted claims. The first is that God's voice is a 'still small voice' in a Christian's spirit, or that God's voice is the voice of Jesus referred to in John 10. The second claim allows for mistakes and inaccuracies when hearing 'God's voice' through prophecy. The paper concludes that Christian leaders should have reason to be greatly concerned about the beliefs of some of their followers. It then offers some suggestions about how spiritual deception can be minimised.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

For many Christians intimacy with God is central to their personal relationship with him. Hearing God's voice has also become part of their everyday life.² It is quite evident in everyday conversations between Christians and the expressions they use. It is also evident in the literature on hearing God's voice, everyday decision making and spiritual guidance through personal prophecies (Blackaby and Blackaby 2014; Cornerstone 2014; Deere 1996; Dein and Littlewood 2007; Dein and Cook 2015; Goosen and Pepler 2015; Huggins 2005; Hybels 2010; Jacobs 1995; Kessler 2009; Luhrmann, Nusbaum and Thisted 2010; Meyer 2003; Shirer 2009; Virkler and Virkler 2014; Wagner 1997; Willard 1999). The question is, therefore, not whether Christians hear from God, but whether *how* they hear from God is scriptural.

² In *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard (1999:18) explains that God's face-to-face conversations with Moses are the 'normal human life God intended for us'.

2. The Problems

Three research studies and the literature on hearing God's voice reveal that Christians, specifically those in the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, claim to hear God's voice mainly in three ways: through an audible voice; through an inner voice in their spirit, which is also often referred to as an 'impression' or 'prompting' and is expressed in words such as 'God spoke to me in my spirit', 'God laid it on my heart' and so on; and through personal prophecy from someone else.

In the next section we will focus on the results of the three studies conducted by researchers who investigated this phenomenon among Pentecostal and Charismatic believers. The results indicate that assumptions and claims about the hearing of God's voice are confusing, often unbiblical and sometimes blasphemous. What causes much tension and what is at the heart of the problem is the fact that Christians find it difficult to distinguish 'God's voice' from their own thoughts or feelings and other voices. We will then turn to the literature on this subject, and our aim is to show that what some Christians are being taught about guidance is often heretical. The third and final section offers a response to two core claims of those who hear God's voice through 'inner impressions'. The first claim that we address is the assumption that God's voice is a 'still small voice' in a Christian's spirit, or that it is the voice of Jesus referred to in John 10. Secondly, we point to the fact that hearing God's voice through prophecy spoken out in the first person, singular, present tense, for example, 'Thus say I the Lord your God', does not allow for the biblical principle that all prophecy should be judged (1 Cor. 14:29; 1 John 4:1). This mind-set of

indiscriminately listening to inner impressions and subjective prophecies leaves room for deception, mistakes and inaccuracies based on a mixture of truth and error. Our aim is to show why both assumptions are wrong.

The conclusion which we reach is that Christian leaders have reason to be greatly concerned about the beliefs of some of their followers. We therefore offer a few suggestions about how error and spiritual deception can be minimised. It is acknowledged that many issues in this paper need a far better specification and analysis, but because of space constraints, they cannot be worked out in greater detail. The issues addressed are meant to illustrate some of the more serious practices that lead to confusion.

3. Hearing God's Voice

3.1. Research results

3.1.1. Descriptions of the voice of God and discernment

Simon Dein and Roland Littlewood (2007) interviewed some members of a Pentecostal church in North-east London, who claim to be hearing God's voice. Forty members of the church were asked to complete a questionnaire on prayer; twenty-five (more than 60%) reported that they hear 'God's answering voice' and were interviewed together with their pastor. Fifteen of the twenty-five (60%) claimed that they have 'heard God's voice as coming aloud from outside themselves' (p. 2). However, all of the twenty-five who heard God's voice also claimed to hear God's voice internally; sometimes recognised as a 'still small voice'. Some referred to the voice as an "impression" on their spirit – a sense of conviction which occurs in "another dimension" rather than the mind' (p. 3). 'All', according to the researchers, believe 'that hearing God's voice is normative for Christians' (p. 8) and that God would not say something to them that is contrary to scripture.

Of particular interest is the way the 'voice of God' was described by these Christians, as well as the fact that it was not critically appraised by the researchers. Although most described God's voice as being male, ten of the twenty-five said that the voice had no gender. One described God's voice as having an accent—a Northern Irish one (p. 3).³ In a study conducted by Simon Dein and Christopher Cook (2015:103), 'Henrietta' reported that she receives 'words' from God through scripture and as having 'images in her mind'. However, Henrietta 'recognise[d]' God's voice 'as a child's voice' (Dein and Cook 2015:105). Although God is sovereign and free to speak to someone in any manner he sees fit, these

3 Luhrmann reports that many of the Christians in a Vineyard Christian Fellowship she studied over a two-year period in Chicago 'said that they had learned to recognize God's voice the way they recognized a person's voice on the phone. As one congregant explained, 'It's a different sort of voice ... It's a different tone of voice' (Luhrmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010:70). Although the church acknowledges that each person experiences God in his or her own way, the 'puzzle was that not everyone seemed to be able to do this equally well'.

descriptions lead to several questions. We need to know what is meant by a 'voice that is genderless', why God would choose to speak to someone in a foreign accent or even in a child's voice? Is God able to speak in a voice that sounds neither male nor female? And if so, how would someone recognise that voice as from God as opposed to any other voice that speaks in a foreign accent or a child's voice?

The problem becomes compounded when it is noticed that these Christians are often not able to 'differentiate between a thought, a voice and a feeling' (Dein and Littlewood 2007:7). Or, in different words, these Christians often are unable to determine whether their 'impressions' are from God, whether they are 'from their own minds and imaginations, or even from 'the enemy' (Dein and Cook 2015:105). 'Naomi', for example, acknowledged that the information that 'popped' into her mind does not always 'work out in practice', and Mark said that spiritual warfare begins in the mind and quoted 2 Corinthians 10:4 (Dein and Cook 2015:106).

Most disconcerting is 'Jane's' inner dialogue she had with 'God' about 'paying her tithe' to her church. In response to the voice asking her what 'God's word say[s]' she must do, she said: 'I said that God's word says you give a tenth as tithe and a voice said, "Well you know what to do then". I said "Okay" and we paid all the money, but it meant that we had no money for food or bills or anything' (Dein and Littlewood 2007:5). It is disconcerting for at least three reasons. First, it is obvious that Jane was either poor or had difficulty making ends meet, and secondly that her pastor noted that her 'behaviour did not immediately change for the better after this incident'. And thirdly, no one corrected her misunderstanding of the Old Testament concept of tithing by comparing it with that of the New Testament concept of giving (cf. Köstenberger and Croteau 2006a, 2006b; Maartens 2014:1–31).

3.1.2. Personal prophecies and discernment

John Huckle (2009) investigated the use of prophecy in many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches and amongst theological students in Britain. His results show that 89.5% of the churches use prophecy for general edification and 65.8% for general guidance and, therefore, that 'personal prophecies in these churches are by no means uncommon' (p. 82). Although several churches discourage 'personal directive prophecies', 60% of the respondents encourage these kinds of prophecies supported by written prophecies (p. 80). To one Assembly of God senior minister, however, 'Prophecies should speak of the future, otherwise it's just a word of knowledge' (p. 81). He implies, in other words, that revelations about the unknown future are of more value than

prophecies that are restricted to the everyday affairs of Christians in the here and now.

What is most interesting about Huckle's research is that it indicates that nearly all (95%) of these churches use scripture to judge prophecies. He also observes that 'whilst scripture does give general principles of proper conduct ... it does not give explicit, focused guidance for every personal situation of life, for example, who to marry and which job to take' (p. 84). He suggests, therefore, that it is not wise to accept 'without question every word that is uttered in the name of prophecy'. This balance is summed up in 1 Thessalonians 5:20, 21: 'do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good' (ibid).

It is disturbing, however, that 'Personal judgement of prophecies [only] occurs in over half the fellowships surveyed' by Huckle, whilst Paul wrote that every prophecy is to be tested. More disturbing is the fact that, 'Over a quarter of fellowships surveyed use other prophecies to judge a new prophecy' (Huckle 2009:84). This means that the practice rests on the assumption that other (older) prophecies are 'more right' and elevated to a 'special category of "approved prophecies"'. In other words, older prophecies are 'treated in the same way as the scriptures' when testing prophecies. But, if prophecies are used to contradict prophecies, what are Christians to do about Paul's instruction to Timothy to avoid 'contradictions [Gr. *antitheseis*]' (1 Tim. 6:20; NKJV)?

We can summarise. Research studies indicate that Christians in the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions believe that hearing God's voice is normative for them and biblical. Although they hear God's voice in various ways, they often find it difficult to distinguish between a voice, a thought and a feeling or between messages from God's Spirit, another spirit and self-generated messages. Although only Huckle (2009:83) indicates some of the dire consequences a 'misguided word' could have for Christians who depend on personal prophecies to guide their everyday decisions, it is worth noting his words: 'Careers (which may be God-directed and be fulfilling God's purpose for an individual) may be ruined and family life unnecessarily disrupted. People can become disillusioned when so-called prophetic guidance proves false and this can damage a person's faith and walk with God'.

Let us now consider what some leading figures in the Prophetic Movement write about the subject of hearing God's voice.

3.2. What Christians are being taught in the literature on the subject

3.2.1. Hearing God's voice and discernment

When studying what some teachers have to say about hearing God's voice, four things quickly come to mind. Firstly, hearing from God, although possible and to be expected, is complicated and takes effort. According to 'apostle' Peter Wagner (1997:55), when Christians expect to hear God's voice, they 'must be prepared to "hear" Him in various ways'. Joyce Meyer (2003:41) puts it thus: if Christians 'are not used to hearing from God, they will find it difficult to recognize his voice when they really need him'. Mark and Patti Virkler (2014) consider God's voice as a 'spontaneous thought' in their heads. One of them says, 'I didn't define this as the primary way God's voice is heard until I had completed a desperate 10-year search to hear Him clearly'.⁴

Secondly, there are several obstacles preventing Christians from hearing God's voice. Meyer (2003:40–42) lists several of these. Among the 'many voices that speak to our thoughts ... our own is one of them'; 'There are many evil spirits ready to whisper lies to a listening ear'; and 'We may hear what we want to hear'. Although Wagner (1997:43) does not indicate how often, he says that 'sometimes the voice of God is a bit vague'. We would do well to ask how his assertion can be reconciled with what we know about God in the Bible.

Thirdly, God speaks in all manner of ways. At the top of the list seems to be 'a still, quiet [or small] voice' that someone hears in his or her spirit (Wagner 1997:43, 45; Jacobs 1995:76–77; Willard 1999:10). According to Wagner (1997:55), 'God has not chosen to limit Himself to verbal communication'. He explains:

Jack Deere [1996] clarifies this as thoroughly as anyone I know. He explains that God at times uses supernatural means to speak to us, such as what Deere calls the audible voice: the audible voice to you alone, the internal audible voice, and the voice of angels. God also uses natural means such as dreams, visions, trances, sentence fragments, single words, impressions, and human messengers.

Elsewhere, Wagner (1997:43) says that God 'sometimes speaks in parables that may need interpretation' and 'sometimes He gives us a partial response and expects us to be patient before the rest of it'. Meyer (2003:40) also has a list of the ways Christians can hear God's voice; she says it can be through his written Word,⁵ through an idea, a prompting or a thought (p. 41), through dreams and visions (p. 45ff.), seeing things in one's spirit, through a prophetic

⁴ Kessler (2009:6) states some of these points as follows: 'To truly follow Jesus we must recognize His voice. How can we know where Jesus is leading us unless we hear from Him? How do we know whom to marry or what job to take unless Jesus speaks to us? ... To be a true follower of Jesus Christ, we must learn to hear His voice'. According to Blackaby and Blackaby (2014:18), 'Do you want to experience God today? Don't seek to hear from God unless you're ready to ask, as Paul did, "What shall I do Lord" (Acts 22:10)'. Although we can appreciate the author's point, neither Acts 22 or Acts 9:1–7 indicates that Paul sought in any way to 'experience God'.

⁵ Meyer (2003:39) believes that the 'Bible has an answer for every question we might ever have'. She based that assertion on the assumption that God's 'answers ... are hidden in the pages of His written Word' (p. 42). So, when a believer reads the Bible a text may be 'illuminated or made alive ... as though God just spoke it into our ears' (p. 40).

word, and even through personal appearances of Jesus, like in the case of certain people she is acquainted with (p. 50). Noteworthy is what God told her through a dream she had just before she appeared for the first time on television: “The Lord said to me, “We are getting ready to go on television in just a few weeks, and I am getting ready to put you on display; but when the people look into your life, I don’t want them to find trash”” (p. 47).

Three things deserve mention. In the first place, not all of the ways these teachers list is found in the New Testament as means through which God speaks to Christians. There is not a single example of someone receiving a message from God through sentence fragments, single words or impressions. In the second place, many of the things mentioned by them are very subjective, and are authenticated by their own opinion only, such as, for example, Meyer’s own interpretation of her dream. What would she have done if she had shared the dream with someone who interpreted it as being irrelevant to her decision to appear on television? In the third place, one may also wonder since when is God ‘getting ready’ for anything? We submit that that kind of talk has no foundation in scripture. For, if God is getting himself ready for something, then he is like a human being who can be caught by surprise, which is unthinkable considering his omniscience and omnipotence.

Finally, since there are obstacles preventing Christians from clearly hearing God’s voice, there must be several ways through which a Christian can discern God’s voice from other voices. According to Meyer (2003:40), we can ‘always check to see if we have peace and if what we are doing is wise’. Although the experience of inner peace is important, nowhere in scripture is it given as a test for determining whether or not someone has heard from God. The peace that must rule in our hearts referred to in Colossians 3:15 is a reference to the harmony that should prevail amongst members of the body of Christ, and it has nothing to do with guidance or decision making.

As an afterthought, one wonders whether it is not unwise of Meyer to use the testimonies of other people describing how Jesus appeared unto them, sitting on their beds and having lengthy discussions with them. The problem is how this ‘Jesus’ is to be distinguished from Satan who appears to believers ‘as an angel of light’ (2 Cor. 11:14)? Notwithstanding the difficulties involved with the experiencing of subjective inner impression, Meyer advises Christians to test God’s voice ‘against our inner witness’ and ‘to trust God to speak to our heart’ (Meyer 2003:57). These statements of hers are highly problematic. For one thing, the Bible nowhere indicates that an ‘inner witness’ is a standard for deciding whether

someone has heard God's voice or not, let alone whether it is the truth. Furthermore, how can one test something by listening to an inner impression when 'the heart is deceitful more than all else' (Jer. 14:14, 17:9). Apart from one's deceitful fleshly desires, the devil is also always ready to whisper a lie into someone's ear!

3.2.2. Prophecy and discernment

'Prophet', and now also 'apostle' in the New Reformation Movement, Cindy Jacobs, appears to be an expert teacher on hearing God's voice.⁶ Jacobs (1995:69)⁷ first acknowledges that there are many problems with prophecy and discernment in the church:

[I]t doesn't take much spiritual discernment to realise that deception is running rampant. Even leaders we have looked up to for a long time are falling into serious sin and delusion. This is especially evident in the prophetic movements. Those considered major leaders are saying things that are causing the people in the church to scratch their heads.

Many writers on prophecy concur. In the words of Greg Haslam (2009:19): 'Satan is quite capable of putting alien ideas into our heads – unwanted thoughts, unwelcome imagery, dangerous suggestions, accusations, ideas and directions'. Jacob's reference to 'delusion' is a problem and may explain the rampant deception in the church, even if only in part. The difficulty is that one seeks in vain in the literature on prophecy and discernment for a way a Christian can distinguish between something someone imagined, a false belief (delusion)⁸ and someone who is deceiving him or herself by believing something he or she wants to be true when all the evidence points to the contrary (self-deception).⁹ Although she acknowledges that 'people may be flowing from divination', for her, 'the benefits of the prophetic gifts far outweigh any problems that are caused' (Jacobs 1995:70, 75–76). One may wonder if her statement can in any way be reconciled with what the Bible teaches on prophecy. It seems that the Bible teaches just the opposite (Deut. 13:1–5, 18:20–22; Jer. 23:16; Ezek. 13; Rom. 12:9; 1 Thess. 5:19–22).

The most amazing thing about the teachings of this prophet is that she acknowledges that she makes 'blunders' when prophesying. But then adds: 'I just pray that mine will be small instead of big ones' (Jacobs 1995:82). Nothing could be further from what the Bible teaches about prophets and prophecy. Furthermore, exactly how big must a blunder be before someone decides it is too big, and who is to decide? Is an error not an error irrespective of whether it

⁶ According to Wagner (1997:52), Jacobs 'has been hearing from God since the age of four'.

⁷ Her book, *The voice of God: how God speaks personally and corporatively to His children today*, has been considered of sufficient importance to have it republished in 2016.

⁸ The word 'delusion' appears in 2 Thessalonians 2:11 and means 'mental error' as the result of moral and spiritual blindness.

⁹ It is significant that this is a problem that is currently debated among psychiatrists, psychologists and philosophers and no consensus has yet been reached. For a good background introduction to the problem, see Tim Bayne and Jordi Fernández (2010).

is 'big' or 'small'? Common sense dictates that small errors can have large consequences.

Is there something that can explain the confusing voice about hearing from God coming from confused teachers, prophets and apostles? We submit that there is: it is the widely accepted assumption that the 'mixed bag' of error and truth coming from them is acceptable and is quite biblical (Jacobs 1995:78; cf. Bickle 2008:52; Grudem 1988:31; Newton 2010:70; Traut 1991:94, 97; Turner 1985:16). We will later show just how erroneous this assumption is. For now, it would be useful to evaluate Jacob's teachings on how a Christian should respond to personal prophecies.

3.2.3. Responding to prophecy

Why is the correct response to a personal word from a prophet so important? According to Jacobs (1995:80), it is because 'you need to interpret the word accurately (i.e., discern what God is trying to say through the prophecy)'. The question that needs to be asked is, since when does God 'try to say' something to someone? It cannot be because he is at loss for words or contemplating what to say. If his words to Moses, the prophets and apostles were pure (Ps 12:6) and tested (Prov 30:5), then it becomes unthinkable that he is a Being who is 'trying' to say something clear and understandable.

To avoid possible misinterpretation and misapplication of the prophetic word, Jacobs (1995:80) suggests that Christians do the following. Firstly, they should tape-record the prophetic word. It is important for two reasons: it helps, as she says, with accountability and it prevents her from being misquoted or the prophecy being quoted out of context. Secondly, the word should be written down and shared with an 'elder' in the Spirit. Because of vague prophecies, it is 'important to let God bring further specific confirmation' (Jacobs 1995:81). Thirdly, the word should not be interpreted 'in the light of your own wants and desires'. And finally, it is important to wait for God's proper time and not to 'run ahead of God'. According to her, when this happens people suffer terrible consequences.

All that appears to be good advice, but there are several problems with her guidelines. It will suffice to point to only two problems we have with her reasoning. The first is in response to her statement that Christians should let God confirm 'vague' personal prophecies. In this regard, she says: '*God never minds confirming His word to us*' (emphasis in the original). She then quotes Matthew 18:16: 'By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established' (Jacobs 1995:83). Most problematic is the fact that neither the text nor the context makes mention of personal

prophecies. It simply says that when your brother sins and he does not listen to you when you reprove him (v. 15), you can take ‘one or two more [witnesses] with you so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed’ (v. 16; cf. Deut. 19:15). The testimonies of the witnesses are based on information that they have perceived and gathered through their senses. The second point is simply this: she nowhere offers 1 John 4:1 or Hebrews 5:14 as ways Christians should respond to personal prophecies. This means that her guidelines, in many ways, are inadequate to help Christians to avoid spiritual deception. It means that Christians are left in the dark as to how they can distinguish between a word from the Holy Spirit, their own spirit or a word from an evil spirit.

In the next section we will show that an ‘inner witness’ is not a biblical criterion by which words of prophecy are to be tested. Neither should Christians accept the fact that personal prophecies may be inaccurate or even contain a mix of truth and error. Because these two issues play such an important role in leading believers astray, they need further discussion. It is to them that we turn to next.

4. The ‘Inner Witness’ and Personal Prophecies

4.1. The ‘inner witness’

Jacobs (1995:77) believes that ‘the inner witness of the Spirit’ is one way by which Christians can discern ‘divination’ (i.e., identifying the source of a false word of prophecy). Because it is unacceptable to think that the aim of the Spirit of truth would be to mislead or deceive a Christian, the challenge is, therefore, to understand what those who teach on the hearing of God’s voice mean by ‘inner witness of the Spirit’. For Jacobs it is ‘the precious promise from the Lord in John 10:2–5’.¹⁰ After quoting the text from the Amplified Bible, she elaborates on what she believes it means. In her words: ‘When the Lord is speaking to us, an answer from within our hearts will cry, “Yes, that is God speaking to me”. We will *resonate* with the word. This is what I mean by a witness in your spirit’ (Jacobs 1995:76).

10 For Virkler and Virkler (2014), it is through John 10:27 that God promises his children that they would hear his voice. Kessler (2009:6) quotes the same text and makes the same inferences as Jacobs.

There are several problems with Jacobs’ understanding of John 10. To begin with, John records four references to sheep hearing the voice of Jesus (10:3, 4, 16 and 27) and there are at least two keys to unlock an understanding of these texts. The first key is found in verse 6, which states that Jesus used a ‘figure of speech’ when he spoke to his disciples and the Jews. Jesus refers to shepherds and sheep, and contrasts himself with thieves and robbers in that he is not only ‘the door of the sheep’ but also their good Shepherd (vv.

7–14). Those who hear his voice are his sheep and they know each other (vv. 14, 16).

The second key is the word ‘life’. The greater context of John helps us to understand the meaning of that term. In John 1:4, the apostle introduced Jesus as him in whom ‘was life, and the life was the light of men’. In John 10:11, 17–18, Jesus announced that he is ‘the good shepherd’ laying down ‘his life for the sheep’. And in John 14:6, Jesus referred to himself not only as ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’, but also states very clearly that ‘no one comes to the Father, but through Me’. So, what could Jesus’s figure of speech about himself as the door and his sheep hearing his voice possibly refer to? In the words of D. A. Carson (1991:385): ‘This is a proverbial way of insisting that there is only one means of receiving eternal life’. Thus, those who hear his call to eternal life (cf. John 3:16) or salvation are those who follow him.

It is also interesting that the Jews who listened to Jesus had no trouble in hearing his voice (vv. 25–26). Their trouble was twofold: they refused to believe him, and they were unable to understand what they heard because they were not among his sheep. We therefore conclude that Jacob’s terminology cannot be reconciled with that used by Old Testament prophets or any of the apostles in the New Testament. The reader of the Bible will also search in vain to find examples of God speaking ‘within hearts’ or someone’s ‘spirit’ and the person spoken to then using it as a criterion to test a prophecy. Neither her supporting texts nor their context make any mention of personal prophecies. The danger is that thousands of Christians will believe that what she teaches is the truth, when it is not.

It was earlier noted that teachers on hearing God’s voice equate the ‘inner witness of the Spirit’ and their own spirit with God’s ‘still small voice’. In addition to those already referred to is Dallas Willard (1999:10). What is astonishing is that it never seems to dawn on Willard that these very words appear in 1 Kings 19:12: ‘and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice’ (NKJV). It suffices to make two points. Firstly, the earthquake, fire and voice referred to in that text were sense-perceptible things. And secondly, the voice was not an inward impression or thought, contrary to what Willard (1999:114–153) would have us believe. The very next verse, verse 13, states very clearly that it was an audible voice which Elijah heard. It says: ‘So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle’.

We conclude that if any person insists that Christians can or should judge prophecies through an inner voice or an impression in

their spirit, then it must be rejected, purely on scriptural grounds. In fact, it is false prophets, as we shall shortly see, who rely on the imaginations of their own hearts and impressions in their spirit.

4.2. The wrongful assumption about New Testament prophecy

For the purposes of this section we will focus on some of the things Wayne Grudem has to say about prophecy, for he is arguably the most theologically sophisticated of those who believe that New Testament prophecy can be a mixture of truth and error (cf. also Bickle 2008:52; Jacobs 1995:78; Newton 2010:70; Traut 1991:94, 97; Turner 1985:16).

To begin with, Grudem (1988:29) defines prophecy as ‘telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind’. He expresses the same definition in different words: Christians ‘report something God has laid on their hearts or brought to their minds’ (p. 30). Grudem then writes that ‘there is almost uniform testimony from all segments of the charismatic movement that prophecy is imperfect and impure, and will contain elements that are not to be obeyed or trusted’ (p. 31). His evidence for his assertion is someone he quotes as saying: ‘Paul says that all our prophecy is imperfect’. He then adds, ‘there is nothing wrong with saying, “I think the Lord is putting on my mind that...”’ (p. 31). We will now argue that Grudem creates more confusion for the church than what he could possibly resolve. In fact, his definition legitimises errant prophecy, revelations and claims of knowledge.

In the first place, since when is a ‘movement’ entitled to decide on the nature of prophecy, specifically, that it ‘is imperfect and impure’? The problem is that there are no examples in the New Testament of any person referring to prophecy in the way Grudem does. What we do know is that the apostles as a group made certain decisions in Acts 15 about the application of the Old Testament law to believers. But it makes no reference to the nature of prophecy. We also know that the whole church of Corinth was in danger of being deceived by the devil (2 Cor. 11:3). And we know that many of the churches in Galatia were ‘bewitched’ by those who taught things that were contrary to the gospel of Jesus (Gal. 3:1). But we find no group or movement deciding on the nature of prophecy. Grudem is also quite wrong when he says that Agabus, when he prophesied in Acts 21:10–11 that Paul was about to be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem, ‘was only nearly correct’; it was not the Jews but the Gentiles (Romans) who captured Paul (p. 30).

Joel James (2001) made a detailed study of Grudem’s assertion.¹¹ What he found is that the words in Acts 21:11, namely, ‘This is

¹¹ See also Compton’s (2004:109–117) critique of Grudem’s arguments.

what the Holy Spirit says', are virtually synonymous with the words used by Old Testament prophets: 'Thus says the Lord ...'. However, the confusion about Agabus' prophecy is resolved when it is compared with the courtroom event recorded in Acts 24, when Paul and his accusers appeared before the Roman governor. This is what Tertullus reported to Felix: 'And he [i.e., Paul] even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him' (v. 6). It stands to reason that the Jews, and not the Romans/Gentiles, are the ones who saw Paul in the temple 'and laid hands on him' (Acts 21:27). Therefore, that it must have been they who restrained or controlled him in some way before they could drag him out of there (Acts 21:30). It is certainly consistent with Acts 21:33: 'Then the commander came up and took hold of him [i.e., Paul]'.

There is a further problem with what Grudem avers. On the basis of which text in the New Testament should we infer that prophecy is 'imperfect and impure'? It is true, Paul writes that 'we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away' (1 Cor. 13:9–10). But it would be an argument from silence to conclude that it means what Grudem would have us believe. Is it not instead that both knowledge and prophecy are not exhaustive? It is certainly consistent with the words 'in part'. But it is also consistent with common sense: although a piece (part) of a puzzle is not the whole puzzle, it does not imply that it not a true part of the puzzle. Likewise, a child can know something about any thing without having exhaustive knowledge of that thing. And whatever the child knows does not at all imply that it is not true.

There is a third problem that Grudem creates. His terminology is inconsistent with that of the New Testament. For example, where does it say Christians 'report something God has laid on their hearts or brought to their minds' as the meaning of prophecy? Where does it say that God 'may impress on someone's heart in such a way that the person has a sense that it is from God' (pp. 33–34)? Grudem uses his terminology as if it is common knowledge what 'impress' and 'sense' mean. Most astonishingly, he refers to 'revelations' (1 Cor. 14:25) as something Paul would call 'intuition' (p. 34)—without any indication whatsoever about how that term is to be understood. On page 35, Grudem states that even 'churches not open to prophecy can be sensitive to promptings from the Holy Spirit'. Are 'impression', 'sense', 'intuition' and 'prompting' synonymous terms for prophecy? We submit that he commits the error which James Barr (1961:218) referred to as an 'illegitimate totality transfer'. The error arises when a series of 'meanings' of a word are read into a particular case (i.e. prophecy) as its sense and implication. But, we must also ask, how do

Grudem's terms differ from a hunch, an impulse, intimation, presentiment, a compulsion or an urge? The discerning reader would recognise that these are all terms that are, more or less, used as synonyms for subjective feelings. But nowhere in scripture is feeling a legitimate reason to prophesy, much less a criterion by which prophecy is to be judged. The Bible tells us that 'imagining' things (Jer. 23:16) and self-generated 'inspirations' (Ezek. 13:2, 17) are characteristic of false prophets—not of New Testament prophecy.

The final problem is both theological and logical. It captures what seems to be the essence of the problem. Grudem and those who follow him fail to keep in mind that Christians have a command to speak the truth (Eph. 4:15, 25). So, if God, who is the God of truth (Isa. 65:16), expects his children to speak truth, including to follow Paul's injunction to 'be imitators of God' (Eph. 5:1), then it becomes impossible to think that God would tolerate prophecy that is in any way inaccurate or a mixture of truth and error. The logical implications are straightforward: if prophecy, in the words of Grudem, is something God 'lays on the hearts' of Christians, then it must be the truth when uttered. Why? For one thing, it is consistent with God's character. Furthermore, a report, a belief, a proposition, a claim, a statement, an assertion, story or rumour, is either true or false. Thus, if a Christian is giving a report, or is making a claim or an assertion, then that Christian has no alternative but to speak the truth. Yes, Christians are not to 'quench the Spirit'; they are 'not to despise prophetic utterances' but they are to examine them, to hold on to what is good and to 'abstain from every form of evil' (1 Thess. 5:19–22). Two of these evils are uttering falsehood and using the name of the Lord in vain (Exod. 20:7; Deut. 5:11). Jesus also sternly warns about uttering 'idle words' (Matt. 12:36).

5. Avoiding Deception: Some Suggestions

If Christian leaders have reason to be concerned about what their followers believe about the hearing of God's voice, then it is appropriate to ask: where did they obtain their idea that hearing God's voice, whether audibly, as a voice in their spirit or through personal prophecy is normative for Christians? Is it through careful exegesis of the relevant biblical texts that are offered in support of claims that God still speaks to us today, or is it from widespread misconceptions which have gone unchallenged for too long? Or, is it something else? We will offer a few suggestions about how to minimise spiritual deception in the area of hearing God's voice.

5.1. Use of precise language

Pay careful attention to the terminology that Christians use to describe their experiences, particularly, in relation to everyday decision making and spiritual direction. Correcting and clarifying claims by using precise language can help weed out many problems and misunderstandings that arise in speaking ‘what is on one’s heart or mind’ or in ‘one’s spirit’.

5.2. Examine all claims

If a person claims to have received a message, vision, revelation or a ‘word from the Lord’, examine them. All such claims, including the character of the speaker, must be judged (1 Cor. 14:29–33; 1 Thess. 5:19–21; 1 John 4:1). The danger of being deceived by false prophets and their words stands as a prominent reason for this judgement. Be especially cautious for those who use ‘smooth and flattering speech’ to ‘deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting’ (Rom. 16:18).

If some Christians are blessed with the gifts of prophecy, knowledge or wisdom and consistently speak words of accurate revelations, then they must be allowed to use their gift openly. Guard against the idea that such a Christian is ‘special’ (1 Cor. 12:14–26) and warn the congregation against dependence upon these gifts.

5.3. Confronting an inaccurate speaker

If someone has claimed to provide a revelation but is found to be inaccurate, he or she must be confronted in biblical love (Matt. 18:15–20; Gal. 6:1; James 5:19–20). Claiming to have heard from God when someone has not is a serious issue (Jer. 14:14; Ezek. 22:28). Allowing it to pass unchallenged will result in confusion and may even lead to apostasy. If someone continues to propagate error, he or she must be brought before the congregation and dismissed from fellowship (Matt. 18:17). The purpose is to protect Christians against spiritual deception and to teach them to fear misrepresenting God (1 Cor. 5:1–5, 13; cf. Acts 5:1–5). If the person repents, extreme caution should be exercised in restoring him or her to any type of leadership or teaching position.

Regarding self-appointed ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’, it is wise to bear the following words of Paul in mind: ‘keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances [lit. occasions of stumbling] contrary to teaching which you learned, and turn away from them’ (Rom. 16:17).

6. Conclusion

Vagueness exists amongst Christians, especially those in the Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions, regarding the hearing of God's voice. The problem is aggravated by how the voice of God is identified, the inability to distinguish between God's voice, a thought or feeling in themselves, and the difficulty of distinguishing between a message from God, a self-generated message and a message from an enemy spirit. A brief look at what some of the experts teach on hearing God's voice and discernment indicates that their teachings are one of the main causes for the widespread misconceptions about everyday decision making and spiritual direction in the church. Some of their teachings are simply unbiblical. It is, therefore, no surprise that claims about divine guidance are being questioned, not only outside the church, but also inside it.

Some of the ways these problems can be addressed have been discussed and some precautions have been suggested: correct and clarify claims by using precise language; examine all claims considering scripture and confront all inaccurate messages, prophecies, words of knowledge and words of wisdom. In the final analysis, all Christians are to imitate their God. And because he is the God of truth, Christians have no alternative but to speak truth.

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