

IS THIS A MESSAGE FROM GOD?

By Bob Young

As I consider this question, I am not asking how we can discern new revelation or whether new teachings should also be included in Scripture. The message of God has been delivered once for all; Scripture is God's inspired Word. Nothing can be added or taken away, because it is complete and perfect as we have it, and to add or take away would make it imperfect. When I speak of a "message from God" I am not implying a miraculous process whereby God adds to his revelation and gives us new Scripture. I am simply reflecting the truth that for 50 years I have stood before God's people and tried to proclaim God's word in human words, terms, and explanations. I have spoken of who God is and what he desires, often in words that do not appear in the Bible. How can one know whether such a message is from God?

Biblically, it seems there are factors which help us discern whether something the preacher says, or something we say, reflects a message from God.

WHAT IS SAID: Is what is being said consistent, is there constancy, is the same message being repeated from various sources?

When the Lord speaks through the words and thoughts of others, or through your own words and thoughts, it should not sound different. The words may be different, the construction and development of the thoughts or insights distinct, but the content is the same.

Thinking of any word that one can clearly say is of God, the content will always be consistent with the teachings and principles revealed in Scripture. It will never contradict the revealed principles. What may be different will have to do with applications or practical life settings.

Further, the message will reflect the willingness of the messenger to serve and to give of self. The message will come from a desire to align with God's word and will and to reflect God's nature in everything. For example, if the words or thoughts—from a preacher, teacher, or from your own heart—encourage self-denial, self-sacrifice, ministry to others, and the well-being of others, one can observe that this is consistent with Scripture, that here are well-known and constant refrains carried by biblical messengers.

Is the purpose of the words (thoughts, message, or conclusion) to call attention to God and to Christ? Do the words reveal or reflect the divine nature, character, beauty, and purpose? Do the words glorify God and Christ, or the messenger? Jesus came to reveal and glorify the Father, and the Holy Spirit to reveal and glorify Jesus.

WHAT IS SAID: Are the words Christ-like and Christian words? What is the attitude reflected in the words or message?

When the message is the Lord speaking, never should one see an attitude of hurriedness, pride, or anger. The words should not be reactionary, nor should they reflect a spirit of competition or the desire to exalt self. They should not reflect anxiety and placing unhealthy guilt.

Biblically, one of the first descriptions of the message of Jesus is peace and goodwill toward men. Jesus' words were not words of pressure, moralizing, or blaming. Jesus dealt with his enemies with authority, but his attitude toward his own disciples was one of compassion, understanding, and patience as they tried to apply the teaching and yoke of the rabbi. He used words of hope, help, and love. He did not use his authority to force his followers to do good. His physical brother, James, later describes the wisdom from above. Few New Testament

passages better communicate the spirit of Jesus. Sometimes Jesus was so gentle that others could not hear or understand him, as in the case of Zacchaeus.

This is not to say that God's message never pricks our hearts, but the spirit of the messenger and the message is one of meekness and peace.

WHAT IS SAID: How do the words compare with God's inspired message? This is the only true source of confidence in any message that comes through human beings today.

When the Lord speaks through a messenger, or through our own words and thoughts, the message must "ring true." In instrumental musical groups, all instruments must be tuned the same, often beginning with one instrument. To say that the message must be in tune means that the instruments God uses are clearly in tune with God. God's Scriptural message defines what is in tune. Because we have heard God's message on other occasions and from other sources, the message resonates, which literally means that it "sounds back" or echoes the biblical message. This is a source of confidence.

Paul wrote of our spirits bearing witness with God's spirit concerning our identity as children of God (Rom 8:16; Gal. 4:6). How does that process work? God's spirit defines what it means to be a child of God, and we know in our own spirits the truth or not of how we line up with that understanding. The Spirit of God is primary. This is not an inner leading or consciousness of the Holy Spirit; this is simply our spirit testifying within us that we live according to the divine message. It is similar to conscience. Conscience is not always a safe guide, but conscience can be trained. The important thing is that our consciences be trained by God's word so we understand what it means to be in tune. Only then are we capable to discerning within the match of a message with God's word. For me, the best thing is always to check the message with specific Bible passages, principles, teachings, and examples.

WHAT IS SAID: What is the outcome or result? When this message is applied, what will be the completion of this word?

One can reasonable expect that any message from God will accomplish his purposes. God's overall purpose is to bring together and make everything alive in Christ. Life in Christ is true life, joy and assurance. I tremble when I hear a sermon that seems to go nowhere, and has little power to advance God's kingdom purposes in this world. Such a message may be totally aligned with Bible texts taken out of context and reflect very little a genuine, authentic message from God.

In some churches, members have heard so many such sermons, usually described as "biblical," that many have lost the ability to discern, what is God's message in my life and in the world? It is not enough to examine consistency, to consider Christ-likeness, and to compare the message to Scripture. One must also ask, where will this lead me? Churches can look successful on the outside, but be filled with people whose behaviors and attitudes do not reflect God's presence in their lives.

When we hear words that reflect God's purpose, we sometimes experience what we call insight. Do you ever have the thought, "That is so simple I cannot believe I had not seen it before?" The idea is suddenly clear, and we know that the insight did not come from our own mental capacity. We are seeing the Word of God with new clarity—not a changed message, but new words in new ways, and we believe that God is helping us grow. Many times, we think about such "new" things for a long time after seeing them, not because we have a new revelation, but because the power of the Word well-understood and well-applied stays with us.

To summarize this final point, the Lord's message produces good fruit.