

The Cross and Christian Community

The Cross & Christian Gifts: Prophecy and Tongues

Pastor Matt Mason

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The Cross and Christian Gifts: Prophecy and Tongues 1 Corinthians 14

If you would, turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 14. We're not going to read the entire chapter together or even comment on every verse, but we'll pick up on the main flow of Paul's argument in this chapter. Beginning in verse 1:

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. (1 Corinthians 14:1-5)

Then from verse 6 on through verse 19, he unpacks that and illustrates that in different ways. Let's pick up in verse 20. We'll come back and look at some of that later on.

Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:20-40)

Controversy and Christian Love

This is God's Word, which means there's truth to be celebrated here. There's life transformation here. There's strength for the church here in this passage. But the challenge for us this morning is there's controversy here. The things Paul is going after - first of all, we've got words of prophecy; we have speaking in tongues. We have one of the most controversial texts in the entire New Testament where Paul is commanding women to be silent in the gathering. And that's not even to speak of the long-running debate about whether some of these gifts are still operative for today or, as some contend, that some of these gifts—prophecy and tongues and miracles and some of these things—were only for the first century, the time in which the apostles lived and ministered, and then when the New Testament canon was completed, we had our whole Bibles and no longer needed those gifts. Is that what's going on here?

Well, we don't even have time to address that issue this morning. If you want to follow up on that and find out more and study more, Pastor David addressed that issue. He argued against those who say these gifts have become obsolete in Secret Church, November 2008. So it's good to know Pastor David has my back on this, even though, coincidentally I'm sure, he has left the country.

The reason for some of this controversy has to do with this: First of all, there aren't many passages that prescribe for us what New Testament prophecy and tongues are supposed to look like in gatherings of believers. You're looking at the passage that tells you what tongues and prophecy is supposed to look like in the gathering of believers. We don't have any supplementary material to help connect the dots. It makes a challenge.

Besides that, it's hard to tell what kind of gatherings of believers Paul is addressing. So look, for example, in verse 26: "*What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.*" Look at verse 31: "*If you just take our turns, everybody can prophesy one by one so that all may learn and be encouraged.*"

So what kind of meeting is this? Either this is a very small gathering, or it is a very long gathering. Imagine if somebody came up here, and you attended this morning, and somebody got up here and said, "Okay, who has a hymn they want to sing? Who has a song?" And then three hours later, "Who has a revelation? Anybody have a lesson? Anybody have something God has been teaching you this week?" I mean, there would probably be a

lot of encouraging material, but we'd be here through Thursday. What kind of gathering is Paul talking about in this context? It's hard, in other words, to reconstruct what this looked like in Corinth in the first century.

Even the mechanisms for how this went about...I mean, think about prophecy, for example. Look in verse 29. So prophecy - apparently according to verse 29, two or three people would share a word of prophecy, whatever that is, right? Then, the others, whoever they are, would weigh what was said, whatever that means. So we don't get a whole lot from other places to help us connect the dots. And I say all that simply to say this isn't cut and dry.

This is difficult to figure out what's going on here, which is why the debate over spiritual gifts should be a respectful conversation, void of demonizing those who differ with us. You know, there are solid, Bible-believing Christians who speak in tongues and share words of prophecy. Not everybody who believes in the ongoing validity of all the spiritual gifts that are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 would be guilty of devaluing the unique authority of God's Word. They wouldn't all be guilty of wanting chaos in corporate gatherings. Many of them just want to be true to Scripture.

So when they read 1 Corinthians 12 and they see a list of gifts, and then they read 1 Corinthians 14:1, it says, "Desire earnestly spiritual gifts," they say, "Okay, then I want those. Lord, would you give me that one? Would you give me that one and that one?" They don't leave any one off. All the gifts that are on that list they put on their desire list. "Holy Spirit, if you would give me any one of those gifts, I would be happy about that." So we don't want to demonize those that are on that side.

On the other hand, there are Bible-believing Christians who believe that some of these gifts—tongues and prophecy in particular—have ceased; they're no longer active in the life of the church. And they're not all guilty—though they're accused of such—they're not all guilty of being embarrassed of the third Person of the Trinity—afraid, scared of the Holy Spirit. Many believe firmly in the power of the Holy Spirit—in the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit—to do whatever He wants among His people. They just also happen to believe that the Holy Spirit has told us what He intends to do, and He doesn't intend to do these things anymore. So that's the way that they're interpreting these texts.

The sad thing is—the tragic irony—is that so much over the debate over 1 Corinthians 14 lacks any of the lingering aroma of 1 Corinthians 13. None of that wafts over into this conversation that we're having about spiritual gifts.

Corinth was an absolute mess. There's no debate about that, but Paul begins this letter by saying, "You're a part of the church. You're a part of all those who call upon the name of the Lord our God." And then, how does he finish his letter to the wackiest church in the New Testament? Here's how he finishes it: "*My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.*" (1 Corinthians 16:24) Oh, for that spirit! As we talk about 1 Corinthians 14, oh, that we would have the spirit and fragrance of 1 Corinthians 13:7: "*Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*"

By the way, this is not a hill to die on. Your belief and practice as it relates to—just to pick the most controversially one of these things—to tongue speech is not the determining factor in whether you make it to heaven or not. That's just a reality, and it's a good reality for us to be reminded of. If it turns out that you're wrong, or it turns out that I'm wrong on speaking in tongues and the validity of these sorts of things, Jesus' work on the cross in my

place is bigger and more powerful than my misguided theology of tongues and prophecy. And that's really, really good news, and it's also freeing news.

Paul, Un-Leashing the Gifts in Corinth

Speaking of misguided theology, let's go back to Corinth. So Paul, he's not trying to unleash the gifts in Corinth; he's trying to leash the gifts. He wants to tether these things—to tie them up—so that they exercise with power and order, not chaos. So Paul has his hands full in Corinth. He's trying to put a leash on the gifts in Corinthian gatherings.

So, he has this mantra that he's got. All the way through the passage, he's beating the same drum: Gifts are for the building up of the church. Put your finger on a couple of different places, and you'll see this "build up" language. Verse 3, *"...for their upbuilding."* You see that word? Just let it grab your eye: Their upbuilding, encouragement, consolation. Verse 4, *"...one who prophesies builds up the church."* There is it again. Verse 5, *"...so that the church may be built up."* Corinth, are you getting the point? This is about building up.

Verse 6, "How am I going to benefit you? How am I going to strengthen and benefit and build you up if I speak in unknown tongues?" And he goes on to give the answer in the next few verses. "I won't build you up," he says that from verses 6 through 11. Then, in verse 12, he comes back to the mantra, *"...strive to excel in building up the church."* In verses 13 through 25, Paul is making the point that prophecy has more power to edify in the corporate gathering than tongues, because it's immediately understandable. He says that in 13-25. Then in verse 26, he returns to the mantra again: *"Let all things be done for building up."*

Then, in verses 27-40, he addresses some of the details of what's going on. People are not only speaking in tongues and not interpreting it, but they're interrupting one another with messages in tongues. They're not even waiting until the first person is done, verse 27. And in verse 29, they're doing the exact same thing with prophecy. "So you start a word of prophecy, and I just interrupt you because I feel compelled by the Spirit to interrupt you. I've got something that is urgent right now." So they're just interrupting one another constantly. Paul talks about the chaos of that.

And then, after these prophetic words are shared, it seems there's a particular group of women in verse 34 who are chiming in after these prophetic words to give public evaluation and critique of those words that were going on. And Paul said, "That's just adding more chaos to an already chaotic meeting. We've got to have..." And this is where Paul goes and he pulls rank and he says, "As an apostle, there needs to be order. Seriously, order. Starting this Sunday, let there be decency and order" in verse 40. That's how he wraps it up.

So there's the three minute update on Corinth. Corinthian news is usually the most exciting news you're going to get in the New Testament. It's kind of the ancient church's equivalent of The Jerry Springer Show. You don't know what's going to happen. And if you liked going somewhere and having no idea what was going to happen—I mean, anything could happen—Corinth felt like home. I mean, this was the place for you, and you would be instantly familiar with the practice of speaking in tongues. It was one of their favorite things to do, and they loved to do it without interpretation.

Tongues

So let's talk about tongues. Turn in your Bible, if you would, to Acts 2. This is the first occurrence of tongue speech in the New Testament. After the resurrection, before Jesus ascended, He instructed (as you may well know) His disciples to wait in Jerusalem. He said, "You're going to be filled with power from on high. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and He's going to enable you to boldly proclaim and witness to the glory of Christ in all nations."

It's a familiar text and that's exactly what happened in Acts 2. The Holy Spirit came upon them, and this is the recording of what happened. Beginning in verse 4:

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound [namely the sound of these people speaking in tongues] the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. (Acts 2:4-6)

He goes on to say in verse 11, "We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." So this just raises the question, "Is Paul talking about the same phenomenon in 1 Corinthians 14? Is he talking about people speaking in languages they themselves don't know but human languages that other unbelievers who are nearby do know and, therefore, to arrest the attention of these unbelievers who understand those languages? Is that what's going on? You can turn back to 1 Corinthians 14 because we'll be moving on from there.

That's a possibility, but it's not necessary to assume that tongue speech in Acts 2 is the same as what's going on in 1 Corinthians 14 for a number of reasons. First of all, in 1 Corinthians 12:10, when Paul is listing all these gifts, he calls this gift "various kinds of tongues." Now, it doesn't make much sense if tongues in 1 Corinthians 12 equals human languages. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense. We don't need an apostle to tell us there are multiple human languages in the world. We know that intuitively.

Secondly, if speaking in tongues is always a known human language—not only in Acts 2 but in 1 Corinthians 14—then you don't need a spiritual gift at all to interpret it. You just need to be multilingual. In Acts 2, the unbelievers who were standing around didn't have the gift of interpretation, which is listed in 1 Corinthians 12. They were from Pamphylia. "I'm from Crete. I know what that guy is saying. I don't need a spiritual gift. I learned that language when I was four years old. That's my heart language." So who needs spiritual gifts when you live in a multilingual culture, when you live in a bustling port city like Corinth, where almost everybody can speak two or three or four languages?

Furthermore, it seems that Paul's expectations for what's going to happen are different than those which would have been informed by Acts 2. Everywhere in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul assumes that these tongues are not going to be understood by anyone in this gathering. He assumes that everywhere. Unless there is a spiritual gift, the gift of interpretation of tongues, that's Paul's expectation.

Finally, according to the Apostle Paul, the person who's speaking in the tongue that they've never spoken in before is supposed to pray that they would get the interpretation. In other words, they were as likely to get the interpretation as anyone in the room. So it may well not be the same thing that's going on in Acts 2, but there's not enough to be dogmatic on that issue. That's not a hill to die on either.

Whatever the case, there's no doubt about this, this much is clear: When people spoke in tongues in the gathering, it was pure chaos, and non-Christians who came in were almost guaranteed to never come back. Which naturally leads to the issue of what Paul is saying when he says that tongues are a sign for unbelievers. You see that in verse 22: *"Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers..."*

So what is Paul saying there? Well, first of all, he's not making a comprehensive statement right there about the whole value of the gift of tongues in corporate assembly. He's already said some other things that we'd do well just to remember. One he says in verse 4. Uninterpreted tongues, though incapable of edifying the larger gathering, is still a gift that builds up the one who uses it. You see that? *"The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church."* (1 Corinthians 14:4) So he talks about uninterpreted tongues.

Then in the next verse, he says interpreted tongues edifies the gathering. You see that in verse 5? *"Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets..."* In other words, if that tongue is interpreted, it becomes edifying for the church again. So that's the second thing he says in this context about tongues on the whole.

The third is this in verse 22: Uninterpreted tongues, whatever this means (and we'll try to dive into it), is a sign for unbelievers. And then, he references this Old Testament passage in verse 21 from Isaiah. So he takes you back 800 years to the prophecy of Isaiah. God has been warning Israel through the prophet Isaiah and through others, saying, "Abandon your idols. Abandon the idols of the nations and return to faithfulness. Return to me in faithfulness. And if not," God was saying through the prophets, "I'm going to lift my hands of protection, and I'm going to let the nations come in, and they're going to take you captive." And the one in particular that Isaiah was talking about was Assyria.

So God had spoken to His people in plain language—in Hebrew—through prophet after prophet after prophet. And this word of judgment that Paul is quoting here is God saying through the prophet, "Next time you hear a warning, it's not going to be in Hebrew. Guess what the language is going to be? Assyrian. And then you'll know judgment has fallen because you'll look around and all the signs and all the newspapers aren't going to be written in Hebrew. And you'll know you've just lost your homeland."

So this is that grave moment that Isaiah is saying. And Isaiah goes on to say, "But you're still not going to respond, even when you hear Assyria speaking in your city, in Jerusalem." It's not a total parallel. Paul is obviously just drawing a point of contact with this story.

Paul is saying, "Bottom line: Uninterpreted tongues do not stimulate belief but seal unbelief." In other words, he's saying, "Corinth, if you guys are all speaking in tongues and nobody is interpreting that, and then an unbeliever—a non-Christian—comes into the room, that person is going to leave. That person brought unbelief with them into the room, and when they hear all of this, they're going to be more firmly situated in their unbelief when they leave. Why? Because they haven't been confronted by anything they can understand. The living God hasn't made Himself known because you guys weren't speaking a language they could understand. It failed to communicate and, therefore, contact didn't happen between the living God who speaks and the unbeliever who was attending the gathering." That's Paul's concern.

But having said all of that, Paul is definitely leashing this particular gift in particular. But for all the abuses of this gift, there are some positive things that the apostle says throughout this passage. And it'd probably be good just to run through them quickly as a summary of apostolic affirmations of tongues. Earnestly desire the gifts of the Spirit. (14:1) Speaking in tongues is a gift of the Spirit. You see the logic here: Earnestly desire it; this is a gift. Why not desire this gift? (12:10, 30; 13:1) The gift of tongues edifies the tongue speaker. (14:4)

Correction of their abuses (which is going on like crazy in this chapter) should not be confused with a prohibition of a genuine gift of the Spirit. (14:29) Paul says that the interpreted tongues are capable of edifying believers. (14:5) Unlike prophecy (14:3), tongues-speech is Godward (14:2, 17). It's more like prayer. Paul would love for every believer in Corinth to have this gift. (14:5) He says, "I want all of you to speak in tongues. If I had my druthers, all of you would be able to have this gift of speaking in tongues." And then most surprising of all, he says, "I speak in tongues more than anyone in Corinth." (14:18)

Prophecy

Let's talk about prophecy. Unlike tongues, prophecy is mentioned all over the place in the Old Testament. Matter of fact, there's a huge section of books called "The Prophets"—the major and minor prophets—which means that, when we come to 1 Corinthians 14, we already have a built-in definition of prophecy, which isn't necessarily helpful because of this point: New Testament prophecy is not identical to Old Testament prophecy.

So let's think about some contrasts, some distinctions, of what's going on in the New Testament versus the Old Testament with regard to prophecy. In the Old Testament, if you wanted to find someone who said, "Thus saith the Lord"—if you wanted to find the mouthpiece of God—you were looking for a prophet. In the New Testament, though, if you want to find the mouthpiece of God—someone who's saying, "Thus saith the Lord"—you're not looking for a prophet; you're looking for an apostle. You're looking for Paul and Matthew and others.

Matter of fact, Paul does this in verse 37. Look in verse 37: "*If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.*" Paul is basically saying, "I am the New Testament counterpart of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and this is not a context of opinions. God is telling me this, to say this to you. If anyone doesn't recognize this, he is simply not recognized. This is not the opinion of an apostle; this is the Word of the living God to you, Corinth."

So there's a transition from prophecy as authoritative speech to prophecy as Spirit-prompted encouragement. Look at the benefits. Notice later on as you read through this text, take a pencil and start to write down, what are the benefits that flow from whatever this gift is (the gift of prophecy that we're looking into) - the benefits that stream form from this gift? They're similar to the benefit from a gift like teaching.

Look at verse 3: "*The one who prophesies speaks to people for their...*" Here's three things that prophecy does. "...*upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.*" Those are the gifts that are similar to teaching gifts, to instruction gifts. He talks about insight and conviction and people responding with repentance and faith and bowing their knee to Christ. He says that later on in the passage. So there's a transition from prophecy as authoritative speech to prophecy as Spirit-prompted encouragement.

Next, there is a transition to how believers are to respond to a prophetic word. There in 1 Corinthians 14:29, we get a process: "You hear a prophetic word, and Corinth, stop after you hear the word. Evaluate that word. Weigh it. Sift it." Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:20, "Don't despise prophecies. Test everything and hold fast to what is good."

Isaiah didn't say anything like that. I mean, when Isaiah wrote Isaiah, he didn't say, "You know, I'm going to share some things that I think are from the Lord, more or less. So you guys just eat the meat, spit out the bones, take what seems to be from God, and leave what seems to be from Isaiah." That's not what he says. And that's not what the Old Testament prophets sounded like.

In contrast, turn over to Acts 21 and you see New Testament prophet, Agabus. So Agabus comes up to the Apostle Paul, he tells him, "Paul, you're going to be arrested. Thus saith the Holy Spirit, you're going to be arrested." He tells Paul this kind of old school, Old Testament style. He takes Paul's belt off, he holds up the belt, he says, "The man who owns this belt..." If I'm Paul, I'm thinking, "Man, you could have just told me about the arrest. Give me my belt back." So this is Old Testament, old-school style. And he says, "You're going to be arrested." And Paul was arrested, so it was on.

But the details of the prophecy aren't exactly accurate. Look at verses 11 and 12:

And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. (Acts 21:11-12)

Well, the facts on the ground, if you read on later into that chapter and later into Acts 22, the Jews didn't bind Paul. He was bound, but he was bound by Romans. The Romans chained him up. And the Jews didn't deliver him over either. What the Jews were doing when the Romans came to bind Paul was that they were beating him senseless; and they stopped when the Romans came and practically rescued him by binding him and bringing him away.

The effect of this prophetic word was that the people in general—the direction of this prophetic word—was, "Paul, don't go to Jerusalem. I have a prophetic word. You're going to be delivered over to the Romans. You're going to be arrested." The effect of it is "don't go." Well, Paul clearly doesn't treat Agabus' prophecy as one should treat Old Testament prophecy because what is he doing the whole time they're saying, "Don't go"? He's packing his bags. He's still going to go. He says - He takes what he believes is from God and says, "Look, I believe I'm going to suffer. The Holy Spirit's already revealed that to me. So, yeah, that part resonates. But I'm going to Jerusalem."

And he went there and it didn't play out exactly the way Agabus had an impression that it would play out. So what does that mean? It means that a New Testament prophetic gift is not one that involves speaking infallibly or authoritatively to others.

So quick summary. Let's contrast Old Testament prophecy from New Testament prophecy. Old Testament prophecy was frequently associated with an office. (Numbers 11:29; 1 Samuel 10:11; Ephesians 2:20) It was, "Let the prophets do the prophesying. Don't try this at home. Literally, you could get yourself killed. Leave this to the pros." It was an office of the prophet. However, prophecy in Corinth was to be sought by every member of the

church. (Acts 2:17; 1 Corinthians 14:1, 39) Paul says, "Desire earnestly, especially (verse 1) that you may prophesy."

Genuine Old Testament prophecy, by definition, possessed divine authority. (1 Samuel 13:8-13; 2 Peter 1:21) But prophecy in Corinth was not to be regarded as divinely authoritative. (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:20-22) You were supposed to stop, sift it, test it, take what's good, abstain from every form of evil. So there was a sifting, a quality control process, that was going on there. Old Testament prophecies that did not come to pass earned one a label of "false prophet" and led to death by stoning. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5, 10; Deuteronomy 18:20)

Prophecies in Corinth, on the other hand, are sifted. That which seems to be from God is taken; anything which seems not to come from God is left aside. Best of all, no one dies. (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:20) This is great news for Agabus because his prophecy didn't go exactly the same way he said it was going to go down. But he's not going to be stoned for this because prophecy has changed its shape a little bit when we come to the New Testament.

While we're talking about this whole sifting and evaluation process, that puts us right in the neighborhood of this command for silence—this command that the women would be silent in the church. What's going on there? It can't be a simple command. It won't work to interpret this as a simple command for total silence on the part of women in the gathering. And the reason for that is God's Word doesn't contradict itself.

If you were here a few weeks ago when Pastor David was preaching on 1 Corinthians 11, in which Paul gives stipulations for how women in the church were to pray and were to prophesy aloud, contributing to the gathering - in that text, Paul was there talking about what it looks like for a women to speak out in prayer, to speak out in prophecy in the gathering. It wouldn't make any sense for Paul, then, to say, "Okay, I already told you how, ladies, you're supposed to talk in the gathering. Now I just want you to know you're not supposed to talk in the gathering." That's just a direct contradiction. It can't be that. There must be something else going on here. And when you look at the context of what leads you to verse 34, the last thing that was going on was this sifting of prophecy; this process of sifting and evaluating prophecy.

So it seems that there would be times where prophetic words were shared and those prophetic words needed to be publicly evaluated and sifted. Presumably, any public sifting, evaluation or correction was to be led by the elders of the church. That's confirmed by how Paul says in verse 33, "*As in all the churches of the saints...*" That's Paul's way of saying, "Look, this is not unique to Corinth. This is the way it's done in every assembly. All the churches of the saints, if there's public correction of a prophetic word, that needs to come from the elders, the pastors of the church."

So Paul obviously wants members of the church—men and women—participating, contributing to the gathering with their gifts. But he does unapologetically reserve certain activities for the local leadership of a given body—for the eldership of a given body. This seems to be one of those things.

While he's talking about authority, that's where he goes right next in verse 36. He pulls rank—which he almost never does—but this is unruly, crazy, mystical Corinth so it's necessary from time to time. Paul basically is saying to Corinth, "I'm not asking you to pray

about this. It's not a contest of opinions. There needs to be order in the gathering; peace in the gathering; leadership given in the gatherings—not chaos."

So perhaps that's something about what this evaluation process looked like. The million dollar question I think we all come to 1 Corinthians 14 with is, "What were these prophetic words like?" So we've talked about the nature of prophecy in the New Testament and the nature of this evaluation process, but what were these prophecies like?

You think about the effect that these gifts had and maybe that tells us something about it. If the effects are these words of prophecy encourage people deeply—they build people up, they strengthen the church, they brought consolation, insight, conviction—then that kind of puts us in the neighborhood of things that we've experienced as members of the local church. I mean, these are things that we've, perhaps, experienced from time to time.

So let me ask you a question: Have you ever felt a strong impression to share something with a brother or sister? Maybe a specific word of encouragement? Or maybe even of warning? Have you ever, as you read a text of Scripture, a person came to mind in a powerful way and you thought of that person. Or have you ever thought a strong impression of prompting to pray for someone at a specific time? If you've experienced something like that, the question is are you crazy or were you, perhaps—and let me add this qualifier—in some of those instances being given a spiritual gift akin to, or in the family of, this prophetic gifting that's going on in 1 Corinthians 14?

Not too long ago, I had a particularly stressful week. It was a unique week, maybe in the last ten years. A lot of heavy stuff happened in a particular week and at the end of that week - the only person who knew about that was my wife. So, I wasn't tweeting out or Facebooking, "Hey, I need some encouragement." Nobody knew about that but my wife. And I got a phone call Friday morning of that week; because of the nature of the week, I wasn't even able to answer the phone call or even listen to the message that was left on my voicemail until late Friday night.

I see this message, "Oh, it's from a guy I haven't heard of in a year." I haven't talked to this friend. We just lost touch for about a year. So I listen to it and it's him on the other side just saying, "Bro, I woke up this morning and felt prompted to pray for you." He wasn't spooky or mystical about it. He said, "I don't know if there's any reason for that. Maybe not. But I just want you to know I'm praying for you and want to encourage you."

Now, do you think that edified my soul? Most definitely! Because it was a rare call in an extremely rare and burdensome week. So as a Christian, I've got options. All right, I'm listening to this message on my phone. I've got options. Okay, I can either chalk this up to an unusual coincidence or I can say, "There are spiritual gifts that operate this way." I am profoundly encouraged—and I think there's a passage somewhere in 1 Corinthians that talks about being profoundly encouraged in unique and unusual ways by things like this—so why should I not in this moment give thanks to God for giving a gift to a friend in a particular moment that would encourage me in a unique way?

Theologian Wayne Grudem defines New Testament this way: "A human reporting of something we believe God has brought to mind." It's a fallible reporting. It's not, "Thus saith the Lord" verbatim reporting of something, but it's something God brings to mind and we report it to others.

So how might we evaluate whether an impression or a prompting that we have in our hearts is from God or not? Well, a couple of things. First, there's no new authoritative revelation from God. It's not like God is going to prompt you to write 3 Corinthians, and that's going to be added to the New Testament canon as authoritative speech for the whole church. No, God has spoken definitively and authoritatively. We have His best and His clearest voice. We have His best word of prophecy; it's called the Bible.

So we're not adding to the Bible. The great news about that is that the better we know the Bible, the more discerning we'll be about impressions that we might have or guidance we sense may be coming from the Spirit. So the Bible helps us to discern, to sift, to evaluate whether these things are truly from God.

We were in the Middle East not too long ago and a bunch of missionary partners were all gathered together praying and interceding and calling out to God, praying for unbelieving friends of theirs by name. It was a powerful time of intercession. Just a few days after we returned from that trip, we got this email. I've changed the names for obvious reasons, but it reads as follows:

I wanted to give you a real cool story that happened today. I took my son with me to run some errands this morning while Jenny and the girls worked on homeschool. About ten minutes after I left, the doorbell rang. When Jenny answered, there was a fully-covered Muslim lady standing with her daughter. We had met Afenon about nine months ago when she planned to move into our neighborhood. We visited with her for 15 minutes in our home, but she ended up not moving into the neighborhood, and we didn't have any further contact until today.

Anyway, Jenny invited her in, she sat in the living room sharing how terrible everything had been going in her life—"disaster upon disaster" in her own words. She said this morning at 4:30 a.m. she was up praying, "God, I'm so confused. I don't know what to do. Show me what to do. Show me the way." Afenon then tried to go back to sleep.

A little later, she got up and took her daughter to get school supplies. On the way home, she said she felt as if the car was driving itself, and before she knew it, she was parked in front of our gate getting out of the car. She then surprised herself by ringing our doorbell. Afenon said, "When you came to the gate, I didn't even know what to say, but you invited me in. I've been thinking about your family the last few weeks; about how when I came last year your kids were obedient, and there was a peace in your home."

Over the next three hours, Jenny was able to share the story of the gospel with her. Jenny is so excited. Thank you for praying. Just look what happened!

That's glorious! That's God on location bringing spiritual gifts to bear on someone's life in order to bring them to Himself. Now, these kinds of stories don't seem to be God's standard practice. This isn't happening every day in our lives, these kinds of things. But they do happen.

And here's the point: When these kinds of unusual promptings result in believers being deeply edified or unbelievers being drawn to Christ, the question is, "Why should we be

suspicious of God's activity?" Perhaps this is God at work among His people, using spiritual gifts to build up, to strengthen and to draw people to Himself.

Spiritual Gifts at the Church at Brook Hills

So let's close by thinking personally and corporately about spiritual gifts at The Church at Brook Hills. One, as believers, we should never mock or belittle a gift of the Holy Spirit. For the sake of argument, even if we would come to discover beyond doubt that tongues—we'll just pick on the big one—is no longer operative today in the church, we should still watch our mouths in the way we talk about tongue speech, if for no other reason than the Holy Spirit thought it was a pretty good idea to give it to believers in the first century.

In other words, this was a spiritual gift. It was not a gag gift of the Holy Spirit to the church in the first century. It was a spiritual gift, purchased by Christ on the cross. Jesus doesn't buy cheap gifts. He buys good gifts that edify the church. And there's good reason to believe that this gift and others—miracles, healing, prophecy—are still in operation for today.

Second: One test of whether spiritual gifts are being used properly in a given gathering is the effect it has on non-Christians in attendance. (1 Corinthians 14:13-25) Part of the reason Paul says—this is his line of argument—part of the reason he says, "Don't speak in unknown tongues," is look what it does to the unbeliever. He's running out of the door and will probably never be back. Great! That's what we're really going for.

Paul is saying, "Don't do that! Look at the effect it has on the unbeliever." And in contrast, part of the reason Paul says elevate prophecy over tongues is look what it does to the unbeliever. Verse 24: *"But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all (What a great day that was!), he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you."* Any spiritual gift, when rightly used, can be used by God to arrest the attention of unbelievers, of non-Christians. Hospitality, for example, is a gift of the Spirit that God uses to attract the lost.

When I attended my grandmother's funeral a few years back, I heard a beautiful story about a woman who was there in attendance. Several years earlier, this woman came into a gathering of the church where my grandpa pastored. She didn't know Christ and knew a whole lot more pain than a girl of her age should have known. And my grandmother ran to that girl, welcomed her and she did hospitality to the "nth" degree. She brought her a warm meal later that week. And the girl said later on in her story, "The day that I looked out my window and saw Ruth Hunt standing there, that changed everything. I wanted her Christ." The gift of hospitality—all these gifts—can be used by God to draw the attention of those who don't know Christ.

Third, spiritual gifts point to gospel truth. Spiritual gifts, you might say, are love moving in the direction of people. When you move toward people in love and expend yourself, you are acting like God. You're acting like Jesus Christ, who came not to be served but to serve and to give Himself as a ransom. Now, your service of love doesn't atone for sins; His service was unique in that respect. But your service and my service of love points to gestures in the direction of the One whose service saves.

There's a personally moving portrait of Jesus in Luke 12:37. Jesus says, "*Blessed are those servants whom the Master finds awake when he comes. Truly I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.*" Jesus coming in the incarnation, making Himself a lowly servant and not coming to be served but to serve, I get all that. That makes sense to me. He had to do that. If we were to be saved, that was absolutely necessary. But in heaven? In heaven, won't it be time for Him to sit down and enjoy our glad service of Him? But this portrait Jesus draws is that the Master Himself wears the apron in heaven. And the servants recline. He comes around and serves His people, even in the New Jerusalem. What a portrait! What a humble Savior! And when we serve and use our spiritual gifts, motivated by love to serve others, we look just like Him.

The spiritual gifts point to the gospel, but spiritual gifts must not be confused with the gospel. In other words, don't fixate on the gifts. Let's not be gift buffs. To quote from Jesus, Jesus said, "Don't rejoice that you were able to cast out a bunch of demons. That's great but don't make that your primary reason for rejoicing. Rejoice in this: Your names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. You've been forgiven of all your sins."

The central message of Christian faith is not—let's just be real clear—it's not 1 Corinthians 14. It's 1 Corinthians 15. Look at 15. "*Now, I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received in which you stand.*" (1 Corinthians 15:1) Paul doesn't say, "I'm going to stand you up on the rock of spiritual gifts." He says, "Let's talk about spiritual gifts because they benefit the church, and they bless and edify the church. And they're used by God to draw people who don't know Christ. But I'm going to stand you on the rock of the gospel. There's no other rock for you to stand on." If you are here this morning and have never turned to Christ, turn from yourself, from your sin, from trying to save yourself to Jesus, I would urge you. This could be your story. You can run to Christ. You can find forgiveness in Him alone. You can find life and joy in Him, the Savior of the world.

Christian friend, this is great news. You're never going to see God's wrath. You should see God's wrath, but you will never see God's wrath—guaranteed. If God is justified, who will condemn? There's nobody left up there to condemn, and the One who is there has justified you. This is the gospel. This is what we should fixate on.

Last, God has given spiritual gifts to members in the church because He loves us and He's intent on strengthening us. And He strengthens us through our imperfect use of the gifts. You know, the gifts in themselves are beautiful, and they're edifying. In my hands, they're not always that way. So I wanted to encourage you with what I shared yesterday, let's say, in our coffee meeting. But it was the wrong words. Or it was bad timing. Or I should've just taken that impression and just prayed for you. Right? So I did my best but there are a hundred different miscues that are possible in exercising our spiritual gifts. But here's the point: God would rather us function imperfectly in spiritual gifts than not use them for fear of making a mistake.

Here's another place where we can grab with both arms the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and the preservation of the saints - the sovereignty of God and the assurance of salvation. God saves sinful people. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And God keeps those He saves. And the great news is that because of those truths, God compensated for the bloopers and blunders in Corinth. And there were many. And the great news is He'll compensate for the bloopers and blunders in Matt. He'll compensate for the bloopers and blunders of The Church at Brook Hills, as we seek to use our gifts to strengthen those around us.

So let's lean forward. Let's ask God for any gift that He'd want to give us and let's use those gifts by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to build up Christ's Church for Christ's glory.

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