

## BUILD UP THE CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

### *The Gift of Prophecy*

#### **I. Overview and Context of I Corinthians 12-14**

- The church of Corinth were new, first generation Christians, surrounded by a carnal city/culture
- In their immaturity, they fell into the practice of elevating certain gifts, specifically tongues, as a marker of particular spirituality
- However, God gives a variety of gifts to His children as He wills (12:11); and there is no one particular gift given to every Christian (12:29-30)
- No gift is more important than another (12:16) – all gifts are critical for the Body to function; every part is necessary ( 12:21)
- These gifts, given and empowered by the Spirit (12:11), are given for the common good (12:7)
- Paul declares that the gifts are rendered *meaningless* if not motivated by love (13:1-3)
- Today’s text -I Corinthians 14:1-25
- Paul’s **Main Point** : Above all, “**strive to excel in building up the church**” (v.12)

#### **How do Christians build up the church?**

- By the loving use of every spiritual gift given by God to the Body
- This is God’s intention for the gifts:
  - That they bless and build up one another (12:11)
  - That they manifest the presence of God among us (12:7, 14:25)

#### **What are the spiritual gifts and how are they defined?**

- **Definition** – *a spiritual gift is an ability given and empowered by the Spirit to minister God’s grace to others*

| <u>I Cor 12:8-11</u> | <u>I Cor 12:28</u> | <u>Romans 12:6-8</u> | <u>Eph. 4:11</u> | <u>I Peter 4:11</u> |
|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| wisdom               | apostles           | prophecy             | apostles         | speaking            |
| knowledge            | prophets           | service              | prophets         | service             |
| faith                | teachers           | teaching             | evangelists      |                     |
| healings             | miracles           | exhortation          | pastors          |                     |
| miracles             | helps              | giving               | teachers         |                     |
| prophecy             | administration     | leadership           |                  |                     |
| dist. b/t spirits    | tongues            | mercy                |                  |                     |
| tongues              |                    |                      |                  |                     |
| interp. of tongues   |                    |                      |                  |                     |

<sup>1</sup> Contributions to this outline were sourced by the works of DA Carson, Wayne Grudem, Mike Bullmore, Martin Lloyd-Jones, Jeff Purswell, Mark Prater, among others. They have been quoted when using their exact words or noted when using their original thoughts.

### Three observations about the lists of spiritual gifts<sup>2</sup>:

#### 1. No list is meant to be complete and exhaustive

- Therefore, its possible that these lists may not cover every last kind of gift God could give to His people

#### 2. There is no specific ordering of the gifts

- It therefore cannot be assumed that entries are given in order of importance, reinforcing the point that each gift is critically important for the function of the Body

#### 3. The lists contain a mixture of more “supernatural” gifts with more “ordinary” gifts

- This points to the fact that God is the one who empowers each of these gifts, whether or not they seem supernatural to us

## II. Our Focus Today: I Corinthians 14:1-25 - The Gifts of Prophecy and Tongues

- In this text, Paul contrasts the effect of two specific gifts, tongues and prophecy
- **Definition of Tongues:** *“Speaking in tongues is prayer or praise spoken in syllables not understood by the speaker”*<sup>3</sup>
  - Tongues is a prayer language that is given for the blessing of the speaker and their sense of fellowship and communion with God
    - *“A supernatural manifestation of the Holy Spirit, whereby the believer speaks forth in a language he has never learned, and which he does not understand.”*<sup>4</sup>
  - It is a beautiful expression of love for God, a language of prayer that is unique and personal and a gift of the Holy Spirit
- **Definition of Prophecy:** *“A revelation from God that is reported in the prophet’s own (merely human) words.”*<sup>5</sup>
  - Prophecy is a human report of a divine revelation
  - *“Prophecy is speaking something that God has specifically impressed on your mind for the edification of others.”*<sup>6</sup>
  - This is something that is impressed on your mind that is not your “ordinary” train of thought; it is put there to be expressed for the edification and encouragement of the church
- **Primary Purpose of Tongues:** Personal praise to God, for the edification of the speaker
  - Personal speaking to God
    - **“For the 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.”** – v.2
  - Edifies the speaker
    - **“The one who speaks in a tongue *builds up himself...*”** – v.4

<sup>2</sup> From DA Carson, Showing the Spirit, pp. 35-37

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, p. 421

<sup>4</sup> Larry Christensen, quoted by DA Carson in *Showing the Spirit*, p. 79

<sup>5</sup> Grudem, p.413

<sup>6</sup> Mike Bullmore, message on I Cor. 14:1-25

- When the church is gathered, Paul instructs that tongues can be shared publicly when there is an interpretation – v.28
- **Primary Purpose of Prophecy:** Public edification of God’s people
  - To build up the church
    - **“On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.”** – v.3
    - **“...the one who prophesies *builds up* the church.”** – v.4

**What does Paul mean, in v.5, when he says that the gift of prophecy is greater than the gift of tongues?**

- Is Paul belittling the value of tongues and unnecessarily elevating prophecy?
- Not at all; in fact he says that he wishes all would speak in tongues (v.5), because it is a good and gracious gift from God
- Instead, he is saying that the broad, public benefit of prophecy (“that the church may be built up”) has greater immediate effect on the gathered church than the gift of tongues (which is unintelligible, unless interpreted)
- It stands to reason, however, that if tongues were interpreted, then the church would be similarly edified as it would be edified by a prophetic word, because both the prophecy and the tongue would be intelligible to the hearers
- Prophecy is not the only gift that edifies the church, as there are other gifts that accomplish this
- But of the two gifts mentioned in chapter 14, prophecy is the gift that accomplishes the building up of the church more immediately because of its intelligibility
  - **“Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”** – v.19
    - In church, 5 intelligible words > 10,000 unintelligible words
      - *“The point is clear: edification demands intelligible content, and tongues, by themselves, cannot provide it.”<sup>7</sup>*
  - **“So with yourselves, since you are eager for the manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.”** – v.12 – an inference to the gift of prophecy
- Therefore, since prophecy has an immediately wider reach to the assembled congregation, Paul tells all believers to **“earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, *especially* that you may prophesy.”** – v.1

### **III. What New Testament Prophecy Is and What it is Not**

#### **A. What NT Prophecy is not:**

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<sup>7</sup> Carson, p.103

### 1. NT prophecy is not authoritative

- Scripture alone is authoritative, and the canon is closed
- OT prophecy was authoritative because it was a direct re-telling of God's words by the prophet – written and recorded for us in Scripture
- OT prophets spoke God's very words, and were written down and recorded as such
- OT prophets would preface the message they received from God by saying "Thus says the Lord"
- To disbelieve or to disobey the words of the prophets in the OT was to disbelieve or disobey God<sup>8</sup> (Deut. 18:19, I Samuel 8:7, I Kings 30:36)
- In contrast, NT prophecy does not have the authority of scripture, as it is the merely human retelling of an impression from God
- NT prophecy is partial – "**for we see in part, and we prophesy in part**" – I Cor. 13:9
- NT prophecy is for a limited time – "**...as for prophecies, they will pass away**" I Cor. 13:8, whereas "**the Word of the Lord remains forever.**" I Peter 1:25
- NT prophecy is subject to human failure
  - Paul says it is to be tested, weighed
  - "**Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.**" – v.29
  - If it needs to be weighed, it means that some should be received while some discarded
- NT prophecy should be in accord with, and never contradict, Scripture

### 2. NT prophecy is not predicting the future

- God's words to the OT prophets sometimes spoke of future events that He wanted people to know
- Therefore, some OT prophecy was "predictive" in nature – what God told about the future was certain to come to pass
- While NT prophecy may involve a sense of coming blessing, since it is not a direct and authoritative retelling of God's exact words, but rather a human telling of a divine impression, it is not fundamentally predictive, holding the authority of scripture
- NT prophecy, because it has the possibility of fallibility, is not something on which to base major life decisions

## B. What NT prophecy is:

### 1. NT prophecy is speaking an impression from God for the upbuilding of the church

- "**the one who prophesies speaks to people for their *upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.***" - v.3
- Prophecy is spoken to others, whereas tongues are spoken to God – v.2

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<sup>8</sup> Grudem, p. 408

- That impression may be spontaneously delivered, may be surprisingly distinct from the person's natural train of thought, and can be accompanied by a sense of urgency or persistence<sup>9</sup>
- 2. NT prophecy is given to bless the Body of Christ**
  - As are all the gifts of God, prophecy is designed by God to bless His people
  - Motivated by our love for God and for our fellow believer, a church in which prophecy is so exercised will be strengthened and blessed by this gift
- 3. NT prophecy reminds us that God is with us and is attentive and active in our lives**
  - Public prophecy, as well as more personalized prophecy, reminds us that God sees, God knows, and God desires to actively minister His grace to us in our specific situations
  - It's God intention to communicate to us that He stands ready to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16)
- 4. NT prophecy is to be desired because it has great public usefulness**
  - **"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."** – v.1
  - **"So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues."** V.39
  - **"So with yourselves, since you are eager for the manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church."** – v.12
- 5. NT prophecy is corporate but it can also be personal**
  - Prophecy over Timothy
    - **"This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience."** I Timothy 1:18-19
  - Agabus' prophecies to Paul – Acts 21:10-11

#### **IV. Common Questions**

- 1. I believe I may have this gift – what does using it look like?**
  - Prayerfully exercise your gift – it is a gift to be earnestly desired
  - Like a muscle, it grows and is refined by use
  - Exercise it in love, out of a desire to build and edify the church
  - Care Group is an excellent context for growth in exercising the gift
  - Come to the prophecy microphone on Sundays as the Lord leads
- 2. What if I don't have this gift, or another gift, that I may desire?**
  - Ask God for it - He is still giving gifts
  - He distributes them as He wills, when He wills – 12:11, 18,28
  - Paul would not instruct the Corinthian believers to *eagerly desire* a gift that God had no intention of giving

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 413

- Therefore, a good question for us to ask today is – *Do I eagerly desire all that God has for me, including any particular gift that He may choose to give me, if by it I can serve God and be an encouragement to His church?*
- Let us desire anything and everything that God would want to give us, including any particular gift
- He is a good God, and only good can come from Him – Luke 11:9-13, James 1:17
- Confident in His goodness, we can posture ourselves to receive from Him:
  - **“Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it”** - Psalm 81:10

### 3. How can I cultivate an expectancy towards God?

- Seek Him - ask God to grant you a greater desire for Him in your heart
- Commune with God daily by prayer and meditation on His Word
- Actively call to mind and rejoice in God’s goodness to you
- Ask God to use you to edify and build up others and serve in any way you can
- Humbly and expectancy wait on the Lord

### V. Maintaining a Biblical Perspective: The Central Focus of Our Worship

- The central focus of our worship in the gathered church is Jesus Christ and His gospel
  - **“For I delivered to you *as of first importance* what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.”** I Corinthians 15:3
- The focus of our worship will therefore not be on the gifts, but rather on the Giver of the gifts
  - The gifts are given to by God to bless the church, and are rightly to be desired, as we encourage one another through their loving use
  - But our ultimate attention is on God Himself
- We affirm the Word of God as our supreme authority in all things, as it perfectly reveals God in His goodness and glory
  - The Word of God is sufficient for all things related to spiritual life and growth
    - **“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises...”** II Peter 1:3-4a
- We welcome and embrace the ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose primary desire is to shine the spotlight on the Son of God in redeeming sinners
  - *“The supreme test of anything that claims to be the work of the Holy Spirit is John 16:14 – ‘He shall glorify Me.’”* Martin Lloyd-Jones
- Therefore, as we worship our Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – our focus is to make much of Him by proclaiming and rejoicing in the gospel, the hope of the world

**For Further Reading:**

- DA Carson, *Showing the Spirit*
- Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*
- Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Sovereign Spirit*
- Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*