

Prophecy and Tongues

1 Corinthians 14:1-25 (CGS #28)

INTRODUCTION – This week, we’re picking up where we left off in 1 Corinthians. As a reminder, Paul has just finished telling the Corinthians that love is the greatest gift of the Spirit, and one we should all pursue. This should recall to our minds what Jesus said would be the defining characteristic of his followers: Love.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34–35)

Now, in chapter 14, Paul is helping the Corinthians (and us) understand the appropriate role of a couple other gifts: prophecy and tongues. It seems the Corinthian church was making a big deal about these gifts, especially tongues. If you didn’t speak in chaotic, ecstatic prayer language during the weekly gathering, we can imagine the more influential church members raising their eyebrows in concern over you, even questioning your salvation. To this Paul says, “All these [gifts] are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Cor 12:11). We are not to look down on people with different gifts, but appreciate them all as good gifts the Spirit gives to equip the saints for building up the church (Eph 4:12).

With that in mind, Paul gives special instructions for prophecy and tongues in this week’s passage. Probably the reason is that these gifts are especially visible, and therefore especially easy to be over-valued and misapplied. First, let’s define some terms:

- **Tongues:** In this context, it’s probably not what the disciples experienced at Pentecost (Acts 2), in which people from different nations understood the disciples in their own various languages. Here, it seems to describe some form of prayer language, but not in a language understood even by the speaker (perhaps the “tongues of angels” mentioned in 13:1). It is spoken directly to God, not to people, so it has no benefit to people unless there is an interpreter, which is a different spiritual gift (v 5, 13).
- **Prophecy:** Speaking God’s words to people, especially with the aim of upbuilding, encouraging, consoling, or teaching (v 3, 6). It can’t be a new revelation because the Apostle John said God’s revelation cannot be added to (Rev 22:18). So it must be simply expounding on God’s Word, the Bible. Therefore, this is probably what we would call preaching today. It benefits everyone.

His instruction for believers with these gifts can be summed up as: **Whatever you do, build up the church.**

Paul describes the Corinthian church’s worship in a way that sounds selfish, immature, and chaotic. If an unbeliever showed up, they’d think the church was insane (v 23)! Paul wants their worship to be intelligible (v 6-11), instructive (v 19), mature (v 20), and always pointing to God (v 21-25). We are told to earnestly desire the gift of prophecy (v 1), but only with the goal of building up the church, not ourselves (v 3-5). **The mission must remain central in our worship.** We could have the most ecstatic prayer language and the most powerful prophetic voice, but if it’s not used out of love for God and his church, it’s useless; even annoying (13:1-2). We must not allow ourselves to focus more on the gifts than on the gift-giver. We are to live in such a way that unbelievers will focus on God, not on us. We must remain dependent on him. Make sure he gets the glory, not us (1 Cor 10:31). And whatever you do, whatever gifts you have, whether “big” or “small” (from a human perspective), use them to glorify God and build up the church.

GETTING STARTED – As a group, take time to answer this question: How have you seen spiritual gifts over-valued or under-valued in the church?

IN THE WORD – Let's dig back into the passage. It's important to strengthen our muscles in reading God's Word. On Sunday, we walked through the passage in the sermon. Hopefully, that helped you to see the landmarks of the passage with fresh eyes. Now, with your group, go back through it and see what God is saying to you specifically.

First, before you read the passage, take a moment to ask God's Spirit to quiet your mind and heart and to illuminate the text to you. Second, read the passage aloud to the group. Then, follow the simple method below (O.P.A.).

Observe: Make 8-10 observations from the passage. Pay close attention to observe and note repeated words and phrases, names, places, and themes.

Principles: From your list of observations, what patterns or big ideas do you see emerging? Can you distill it down into 2-4 big idea truths?

Apply: Moving from your list of principles, it is time to apply God's Word. Remember, we believe that God's Word is living and active and that it can change the way we live Monday-Friday. What is one tangible way to apply a truth from your list above?

DISCUSS – Another way to approach your time together is to talk through the following discussion questions:

1. What did you hear God's Spirit say to you through the passage this week? How does it encourage you? How does it sharpen you?
2. How have you seen God at work in your life this week? Have you enjoyed him? Have you heard his voice and the leading of his Spirit? Big ways or small ways.
3. What does Paul keep coming back to as the purpose of the spiritual gifts? Why is that so important?
4. Why do you think the Corinthian church struggled so much with spiritual gifts? What was Paul's solution to their struggle?
5. Why is prophecy (probably what we would call preaching today) more helpful for building up the church than speaking in tongues?