

Christians Gone Wild!
1st Corinthians, week 31
Spiritual Gifts V: Prophecy and Tongues (1 Corinthians 13:1–14:25)
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Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts . . .
1 Corinthians 14:1

This week, we will be studying more verses than we probably should. Because they form one unit of thought, though, we will seek to move through them together in hopes of grasping the full breadth of what God intended for us to learn when the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write these words. As we do, we will be wading into some of the most hotly debated and controversial sections and doctrines in all of Scripture.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is communicating one large concept, namely that there is a difference between spiritual giftedness and spiritual maturity. Spiritual giftedness is God's enabling of us to serve Him in fruitful ministry. However, spiritual giftedness alone is not sufficient for us to be like Jesus or for our church to be unified and loving as Jesus intends. Therefore, spiritual maturity is at least as important as spiritual giftedness. Spiritual maturity is marked by love. Practically, this means that despite the difference of gifting and ministry, every Christian is to use their gifts in such a way that others know they are loved by God, the church, and the person who is ministering to them. Apart from maturity, giftedness is simply an opportunity to do great evil.

Paul also speaks about the spiritual gifts of prophecy and tongues in this chapter, but he will further teach about them in 1 Corinthians 14:1–25. In an effort to understand these two very hotly debated gifts, I will first seek to define what they are. By way of clarification on how long tongues will endure, 1 Corinthians 13:8–12 teaches that both prophecies and tongues will continue until the perfect Lord Jesus returns and our imperfect ministries come to an end.

Tongues

The word “tongues” is best translated “languages” from the Greek. The Bible is clear that not everyone can or will have the gift of tongues (Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:10–11, 29–30). The confusion regarding tongues is that at least three different uses of the gift are mentioned in Scripture.

1. There is a private prayer language. Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 14:14 saying, “I pray in a tongue.”
2. There is a missionary gift that enables someone to speak the gospel of Jesus to foreigners in their native language that the speaker does not know. Acts 2:1–13 records just such an occasion when 3,000 people were saved in a day as the gospel was preached through the early Christians. Another example includes the Gentile converts at Cornelius' house who had the same experience as Acts 2:1–13 in Acts 10:44–47 and 11:15–8.
3. There is a revelatory language whereby a message of God is spoken in a language unknown to the speaker that must be translated into the native language of the people in the church so that they can understand what is

being said. This use of tongues, therefore, also requires the assistance of someone with the gift of interpretation (1 Corinthians 12:10).

Prophecy

There is great abuse of and confusion about the gift of prophecy. Much like the gifts of apostleship and pastor, there is both an office that is limited to a few people and a gifting and ministry that is open to many who receive the spiritual gift of prophecy.

In the Old Testament, the title “prophet” refers to the office of the person chosen by God to both hear from and communicate for Him (1 Samuel 3:20; 1 Kings 18:36; 2 Kings 6:12; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1). The prophetic calling combined two ministries. First, prophets received specific revelation directly from God. Second, they spoke that revealed Word to the people God had called them to. The prophets were also painfully aware of the weightiness of their call since they consciously knew that they were the very mouth of Almighty God and spoke for God Himself. This is clearly seen in Moses (Exodus 4:16; 7:1–2), Isaiah (Isaiah 1:20), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:7), Amos (Amos 3:8; 7:16), and Zechariah (Zechariah 7:12). According to the Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad, the phrase “the word of Yahweh” appears 241 times in the Old Testament, 221 in relation to a prophet.

Additionally, Jesus (Matthew 7:15; 24:11, 24), Paul (Acts 20:29–31) and John (1 John 4:1) all promised that false prophets would come. False prophets falsely claim to speak for God (1 Kings 22) and may also perform false miracles (Deuteronomy 13:1–3; 2 Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:13–15).

While no one single test for authentication of a prophet is appropriate, a few criteria help distinguish between true and false prophets. A true prophet had outstanding moral character (Ezekiel 13:10–16), while false prophets did not (Isaiah 28:7). The prophecy of a true prophet came true every time (Deuteronomy 18; Jeremiah 28; 1 Kings 22). False prophets were for hire and preached what they were paid to preach (Micah 3:11). False prophets prophesied only peace (Jeremiah 6:13–14; 8:10–11). The message of a false prophet conflicted with God’s prior revelation, led to the worship of false gods, and was punishable by death (Deuteronomy 13). Perhaps the most thorough descriptions of false prophets are given in Deuteronomy 18:14–22 and Jeremiah 23:9–40. Today, Christians can also help to discern between true and false prophets by their inward testimony of the Spirit (Deuteronomy 18:14–22; John 7:17).

The Old Testament prophets were raised up by God along with the New Testament apostles to give us His Word that we now know as Scripture (Ephesians 2:20). Therefore, with the canon of Scripture now closed, the office of prophet does not exist in our day as it did before the Scriptures were completed.

There remains, however, the spiritual gift and ministry of prophecy. Like tongues, prophecy is also spoken of in various ways throughout Scripture. Importantly, the New Testament does not elevate prophecy to the highest level of authority as the Old Testament does. Each potential prophecy is supposed to be tested and approved by church leaders such as the elders (1 Corinthians 14:29–32; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–22).

1. In the broadest sense, prophecy is sometimes the teaching ministry of preaching the Bible as God’s Word in the church. Examples include 1 Corinthians 14:4 where prophecy “edifies the church,” 14:6–7 where Paul

links prophecy and teaching, saying, “prophecy or word of instruction,” and 14:24–25 where he explains that through the Spirit-enabled preaching of the Bible, non-Christians will be convicted of their sin and give their lives to Jesus.

2. Prophecy is sometimes a revelation about a future event that God intends to reveal to the entire church; a revelation that is authenticated by coming true as predicted. Roughly 25 percent of the Bible was prophetic in this regard in that it foretold future events. This is what Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 14:6 where he links “revelation or knowledge or prophecy.” A clear example of this is Acts 11:28–29, where the prophet Agabus predicted a famine, thereby preparing the early Christians to better help people.
3. Prophecy is sometimes a word from God to be given to an individual. An example of this is the prophet Agabus who told Paul how he would die in Acts 21:10–11.

Having established the three ways in which tongues and prophecy are used in the New Testament, we will examine six instructions regarding their use in 1 Corinthians 14:1–25.

1. We are to value every gift and elevate Bible preaching/prophecy as the place of authority in the church (14:1–5).
2. We are to value gifts that build up the whole church and not just the person exercising the gift (14:6–12).
3. Those who pray or sing in tongues should also ask God to enable them to have the gift of interpretation (14:13–17).
4. Speaking in tongues is not meant for public use in such places as church services (14:18–19).
5. Tongues were also used as a sign of God’s judgment on the disobedient (14:20–22 cf. Isaiah 28:11–12 and Deuteronomy 28:49–50).
6. Church services should not overlook the need for non-Christians present to become Christians, which best happens by preaching God’s Word with the accompanying power of the Holy Spirit (14:23–25).

For further study: One of the most respected New Testament scholars is Dr. D. A. Carson. His book, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14*, is a helpful read for those wanting a thorough examination of this section of Scripture.

Verses for next week: 1 Corinthians 14:26–40