

"Prophecies, Tongues and other Gifts"

(Gifts of the Spirit; Holy Spirit, Fellowship)

I Corinthians 14

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Our young daughters and Barbara and I were on vacation and decided to visit a Pentecostal/Charismatic church in the community in which we were living at the time.

A few minutes into the worship time someone began to speak out loudly in what they called "tongues".

They obviously were not speaking in English and it didn't sound like any language I'd ever heard before.

The whole experience was unusual for us and I felt and saw my daughters pull up very close beside Barbara and me - their eyes wide open with some anxiety.

The person spoke for only a minute or less and then it was silent in church for what seemed like a long time - just silence.

But in fact, very soon, someone else in the congregation spoke out in English and said he was interpreting what had just been spoken in that unknown language or in unintelligible sounds.

I listened carefully to the second speaker and heard a good word of encouragement for the whole church.

As I recall it didn't happen again in that service of worship.

I realized afterward we had just witnessed what some call the spiritual gift of tongues and the spiritual gift of interpretation.

In an entirely different setting and much more recently, Coach Bill McCartney was hosting a pastors' meeting for those interested in the men's ministry called "Promise Keepers".

After several minutes of remarks, Bill expressed deep concern about letting the pastors down by failing in some way or by embarrassing the people of God.

Pastor Don Payne was there in my stead and he as well as another pastor told me what happened next.

A pastor stood up in the audience and spoke out loudly and boldly saying something like: "In Jesus name, I free you from that fear. Jesus is our leader. He will not fail. You, Coach, are free to try and even free to fail. We are with you and we are brothers walking together."

It was told to me that there was an almost tangible sense of the rightness of that response. Everyone just knew that that was an expression from God. A burden was lifted from the Coach and the esprit de corps was enhanced for everyone. God has used one of his servants to speak into a very specific situation to minister grace.

I know the pastor who spoke out and I believe what Don and the others witnessed is what the Scriptures would call a prophecy.

"Tongues" and "prophecies" - not common words in my experience or teaching.

But in I Corinthians 12-14 there is an assumption made by the Apostle Paul. The assumption is that these spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy were in regular use in the church at Corinth.

In fact so regularly were they used by the Christians of that church that he had to write to correct their use - things had gotten out of hand.

But please note, as I have had to, that in what would have been a perfect opportunity to tell the church to completely stop doing these things (speaking in tongues and prophesying) instead he specifically does not stop them but corrects their use.

Paul doesn't dismiss these experiences as false, demonic, or unwarranted but he instead discourages their abuse.

In Chapter 12, which we looked at last week, the Apostle made a clear case for every Christian being gifted by the Holy Spirit with spiritual ability to minister to others in the church.

We call that ability, spiritual gifts or spiritual giftedness.

The second major point Paul made was every Christian ought to use his or her spiritual giftedness to minister to others - He said every gift is important for the strengthening of the church - God's people.

So here, in I Corinthians 14, Paul is not discouraging the use of these gifts of tongues and prophecy but he is instructing in how they are best used to accomplish their intended purpose - strengthening other Christians.

The impression we get from reading the text is that things had gotten out of hand in the Corinthian church.

Imagine a hundred people gathered together in some large house or meeting room.

The leaders start the worship time and before long it is bedlam. Many people are speaking at the same time.

Some are speaking out in tongues - totally unintelligible either to the speakers or those around them.
 Many are speaking out in Greek and some probably even in Hebrew - they could be understood except for the confusion.

And the confusion wasn't the worst part of it all.
 Worse still was the spiritual pride that some had because they could speak in tongues - to them a sure sign of God's greater blessing on them - truly spiritual Christians spoke in tongues.

What was the problem in Corinth? - Much too great an emphasis and dependence on tongues in their Christian lives and particularly in their gatherings.

Many in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles say that tongues and prophecies are essential in the life of the Christian and the church.
 And some of them look at those who don't have tongues or prophecies as stodgy and spiritually deprived.

On the other hand, many in Reformed and Dispensational circles dismiss tongues and prophecies as threats to the unique authority of the Scriptures and as experiences that lead people into subjective guidance rather than a dependence on the Word of God.
 And some of them look at those who do use tongues or prophecies as spiritually deceived or worse yet - demonically influenced.

Still others just don't know what to make of the talk of tongues and prophecies.

My assessment of Southern Gables Church is not that we are into excessive and uncontrolled use of tongues and prophecies but that we largely dismiss the phenomena.

Is it possible that in our fear of the excesses of some in the charismatic movement we have "thrown the baby out with the bath water?"

This morning I want to very carefully, even tentatively, ask you to join me in considering a different response to these spiritual gifts.

My desire is to crack the door open to the possibility of allowing for more Spirit-led spontaneity and vitality in our ministry to each other.

As will be clear from the remainder of this message, I am not suggesting "anything goes" but I am proposing that we prayerfully consider what God may want to be doing in our midst.

I want to come back to this issue of application later.

I have already given you illustrations of tongues and prophecy but I would like now to give you some working definitions.

First of all what does it mean to speak in tongues?

We know that it may be possible for some to fake speaking in tongues or for others to be psychologically manipulated into speaking what they think are tongues.

And we know that many non-Christian world religions experience tongues - probably demonically inspired.

But just because there are non-spiritual or even ungodly tongues doesn't mean there are not real Spirit of God led tongues.

After all the Apostle Paul himself wrote that he spoke in tongues.

What is the real thing - spiritual tongues?

It is the unintelligible expression of a Spirit led impression on the heart of the Christian that was unplanned.

Without the Christian having planned for it, the Spirit of God impresses upon his or her heart some sense of worship or some sense of importance that then is expressed in unintelligible sounds - tongues.

As you will hear in a few minutes, whenever that gift of tongues is used, when Christians are together, there is to be an interpretation of it.

That ability to interpret the tongues is called the gift of interpretation.

Now apparently that gift of interpretation is the spontaneous ability to express with intelligible words what the tongues speaker was only able to express in unintelligible sounds.

Now it is important to note that the message through the tongues speaker and the interpreter, when legitimate, was from the Lord and is called a revelation.

The Spirit of God speaks to His church through the tongues and its interpretation.

That raises some real questions which I want to come back to in just a minute

But because interpreted tongues and prophecies are so similar I want to give you a definition of prophecy.

"Prophecy is the receiving and verbal expression of spontaneous and divinely originating revelation." (Grudem)

In both the case of tongues and prophecy I mentioned they are spontaneous.

What I mean is that they are unplanned.

But this doesn't mean tongues or prophecy are uncontrolled - as if you just can't keep from speaking when it happens.

No, we are saying the receiving of the idea from the Lord is unplanned not the expression of it.

As we will see the expression is to be controlled.

Not only are these impressions or thoughts spontaneous, unplanned, but I have said in definitions that both the tongues and the prophecies are "revelations" from the Lord.

Most of us have been schooled to think of revelation only in terms of the written Scriptures.

And we are rightly suspicious of anything else that claims to be the revealed Word of the Lord such as the Book of Mormon or other pretenders to being divinely inspired words from God.

But the New Testament uses the word "revelation" quite broadly.

And when we speak of tongues and prophecies as being revelation we are not threatening the uniqueness of the Scriptures.

For example Jesus asked the disciples who they thought he was.

Peter answered, You are the Christ the Son of the living God.

To that Jesus said, "You are blessed, Simon, because this was not revealed to you by man, but my Father revealed it to you."

Only later when those words were written by Matthew under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit did they become the uniquely inspired revelation of God that we call the Scriptures.

But at that moment when Peter spoke them, those words were "revealed" to Peter by God.

God ministered directly to Peter giving him those words to speak not just for his sake but all those with him.

Does that mean that any prophecy spoken today in the church is as authoritative as those of the Scriptures.

Absolutely not.

As we will see in a few minutes - any prophecy today must be evaluated, tested, carefully weighed to see if it is from the Lord.

And it must be evaluated because we, the speakers, are fallible.

There is a difference then between that revelation that is the uniquely inspired, authoritative, infallible, inerrant Word of God -

over which the Spirit of God exercised such control that every word is exactly as he meant it to be -
 there is a difference between that and that revelation that comes through fallible speakers in the form of tongues or prophecies today.

Thus tongues and prophecies are subject to the Scriptures.
 They must not contradict and they must be consistent with the Word of God.

Let me summarize these definitions this way:

Interpreted tongues and prophecies are spontaneous Spirit-prompted impressions or thoughts to be shared for the spiritual good of others.

Let's go now to I Corinthians itself and see what we can learn about these issues.
 On page 5 of your program I have given you an outline of the chapter that I hope will help you better understand the instruction Paul is giving.

He has given us a fairly straightforward presentation of his ideas.

He has two major things to say (Roman numerals I and II):

First of all (vv 1-25) he states his preference for prophecy over uninterpreted tongues - when Christians are together.

Secondly (in vv 26-40) he writes to the necessity of order when they come together.

First of all then, why does Paul prefer prophecies over uninterpreted tongues?

Before we look at the answer to that, I think it is important that you not infer from this text more than Paul is saying.

He does not denigrate tongues speaking in private.

In fact Paul indicates that he speaks in tongues more than the Corinthians do.

What he is opposed to is the use of uninterpreted tongues when believers are together.

Why?

First of all Paul writes, when Christians are together and they speak in tongues without interpretation it doesn't do the believers any good.

In V2 Paul writes if someone just speaks in unintelligible tongues nobody can understand him.

In contrast, he writes in verses 3-5, when someone prophecies, they can be understood and the whole point of coming together is to worship together and to strengthen each other in the faith.

In verses 6-12 he reiterates that point by using three illustrations:

In verse 7 he says the sound from a musical instrument has to make sense or it doesn't accomplish its purpose.

In verse 8 he says a battle trumpet better be clear or soldiers won't know what to do.

In verse 10 he refers to human languages saying if someone doesn't understand the language, the sounds are of no value to him.

His summary is in verse 9: READ

In verses 13-19 he again states why he prefers prophecies over uninterpreted tongues.

The essence of the words is this:

If you are going to speak in a tongue make certain you interpret because if you don't no one can join you in your praise or thoughts because they don't know what you are saying.

And verse 19 - because the whole point of coming together is to help each other, Paul would rather speak five intelligible words than ten thousand in an unintelligible tongue.

So what's the point:

When you come together as believers, for your own sake, don't use uninterpreted tongues - nobody is helped by that.

As we think about this instruction what picture do we get of what should be happening at least some times when Christians come together?

It is not just one teacher or leader who is involved but all the believers are involved in building each other up.

Every Christian is gifted by God to help or speak in ways that will, according to verse 3, "strengthen, encourage or comfort".

Do we at SGC allow for such informal times when people can minister to each other - when prophecies or tongues with interpretation, along with other gifts can be expressed to help each other?

I want to say more about that later.

But not only is Paul concerned for believers, he is also concerned for unbelievers who may come into their gatherings.

And so in verses 20-25 he tells the Christians, for the sake of unbelievers, not to use uninterpreted tongues when they come together.

Paul uses a fairly complicated argument in these verses but the essence of it is very clear in verse 23: READ

But in verse 24 he says if an unbeliever comes in and hears people speaking intelligibly, prophesying, he may well truly understand and believe and acknowledge "God is really among you!"

Uninterpreted tongues are ruled out in all gatherings of God's people.

It seems to me that in this section Paul almost rules out even interpreted tongues in the more public times of worship.

For the sake of unbelievers who might otherwise think you're nuts and miss the whole message, it seems there is good reason not to use tongues at all when you are gathered in your public meetings.

Well in the first 25 verses Paul has certainly stated his opposition to using uninterpreted tongues when believers come together.

And he gave two reasons for it -

Uninterpreted tongues don't do the believers any good AND
uninterpreted tongues don't do unbelievers any good.

Verse 26 then forms a bridge summarizing what he has already said and setting up the instruction to follow: READ V26

Then, beginning at verse 27, Paul gets very specific about how tongues and prophecies are to be used when they are used.

Just because tongues with interpretation and prophecies are genuine spiritual gifts, doesn't mean anything goes, spiritual gifts must still be exercised in a responsible way.

In verses 27-28 he gives instruction on how tongues are to be used:

First, when you come together, two or at the most three should speak in tongues.

Secondly, any who are speaking in tongues are to speak in turn - not all at once.

Third, those tongues must be interpreted.

And fourthly, if there is no interpreter then keep quiet - even if you believe you got an impression from the Spirit you are to control yourself and let that impression be for you and God alone.

In verses 29-31 Paul gives instruction about how prophecies are to be used:

Notice how similar to the instruction on tongues:

One, only two or three at any one gathering.

Two, give the prophecies in turn, yielding to each other

And three, carefully weigh what is said - the prophecy may be from the Lord but there is no guarantee that the prophet, the speaker is conveying it with accuracy.

In the remainder of the chapter Paul demands that self-control and order prevail and then he closes with verses 39-40: READ

IN all of this, what have we heard from Paul about tongues and prophecies?

1. Uninterpreted tongues are o.k. for private use but not in a gathering of God's people.
2. Interpreted tongues are appropriate in your gatherings but they may be a liability if unbelievers are present - remember? They'll think you're crazy and miss the message.
3. Interpreted tongues and Prophecies are beneficial gifts of the Spirit to be used for the strengthening of God's people.
4. But make certain that building each other up is truly your goal and therefore don't exercise those gifts without order and self-control and never think of them as superior to other gifts.

Now what does a church like Southern Gables do with all that?

Earlier I said very carefully, even tentatively, I wanted you to join me in considering a different response to these particular spiritual gifts than many of us have given them in the past.

Can tongues with interpretation and prophecies be allowed at Southern Gables?

Given what Paul teaches about these gifts
and given the cultural situation in which we live in which some of the spiritual gifts have been abused
and given that whole churches have split over such issues how do we proceed?

With help from others I suggest the following:

1. Pray - Let's begin to pray that if we as a church have been cheating ourselves out of a legitimate spiritual ministry to each other that we would come, collectively, to understand that.
 Pray that there would be consensus on whatever direction we take.
 Pray that the unity of the body would be preserved and
 as we will see in a couple of weeks from chapter 13 that love would prevail.
2. Next, study the Word for yourself - Spend more time in this passage and others seeking what God is teaching about the variety of spiritual gifts.
3. Wait. I am discouraging people from immediately using tongues with interpretation and prophecies by that name in our gatherings.

In your group, be sensitive, pray with others about it, talk to each other about it, seek peace and unity and see if the Holy Spirit has given freedom to practice these gifts in the group you are part of.

4. Recognize that the gift of prophecy is already being used in our midst even though we may not call it by that name.

I hope you have been in times of prayer with others when you or someone else was prompted so clearly by the Lord to pray for something in particular and to pray in a particular way.

And as you led in that prayer you and others sensed that, "yes, that is exactly right".

That seems to fit all the criteria of prophecy- a spontaneous prompting of the Spirit of God wherein you get a strong sense of what the Lord is telling you and you express it to others for their benefit.

Learn to recognize that the gift of prophecy is already being exercised in our groups.

(Parenthetically, don't confuse prophecies with teaching.

The gift of teaching is not dependent on spontaneous promptings of the Spirit but is dependent on the good and sometimes hard work of understanding, expressing and applying the written Word of God.

Prophecies may occur within teaching and preaching but they are two different gifts.)

5. Fifthly, I would like us, in the proper time, to make room for prophecies in our informal times together.

I must confess I'm still leery of tongues, even interpreted tongues, because of the way people have abused them and the way other's have reacted to them and divided churches.

And for reasons we have already stated, I don't think our large public gatherings are the best place for these easily misunderstood experiences to be tried.

But I believe much could be gained if in our smaller groups we allowed more time for waiting on the Lord in prayer and worship and allowed the Spirit of God to minister through each other.

If someone is impressed that God has laid something on their heart and mind - a revelation from God, then there should be a place to express that for the good of everyone.

There is implicit in the teaching of Scripture the idea that we are called to a living relationship with our God.

And that relationship is fleshed out in our relationship to each other - God ministering intimately and specifically to us through each other.

I want your and my relationship to God and to each other to be not only objectively true but subjectively experienced.

Sixth and last if, in the future, we allow for such spontaneous expressions of ministry as prophecies to be used in our smaller groups I would insist that a godly "well-grounded-in-the-Word" leader be present to provide for leadership in weighing carefully what is being said and properly ordering any use of tongues with interpretation and prophecies.

And such a leader would also be responsible for making certain no special spiritual status is given or taken by those who have some of these gifts.

I would also ask that with prophecies and interpreted tongues we never say, "Thus saith the Lord," or "God told me to tell you" but instead use the less authoritarian "I think the Lord would have me say such and such" or "I believe this is what the Lord is saying to me".

This whole book has been dealing with God's people ministering to one another.

Do we allow sufficiently for that to happen?

Can we learn much more about every Christian ministering to the others?

I think so.

Pray.