

Spiritual Gifts: Prophecy & Languages

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

God gives every gift to the Church, and every gift is meant to be used to edify the body. Paul teaches about prophecy and languages because these gifts were misunderstood and misused. When the biblical principles are understood, not only are we built up, but the world sees that God is among us.

Prophecy

The pursuit of love is ongoing, which just means God and your neighbor are always there (v1). All the spiritual gifts are good, but Paul says especially to desire to prophesy. This might seem like a contradiction because he just rhetorically asked, “Are all prophets?” (12:29), but there’s a difference between being a Prophet and prophesying. A capital “P” Prophet holds an office, and usually come out the wilderness, hairy and scary. He says, “thus saith the Lord” and predicts the future always with 100% accuracy and in the name of the Lord alone (Deut. 18:22; 13:1-3). But outside this office there have also been people who through the Spirit prophesy about the future, like Agabus predicting the famine (Acts 11:28; 2:17). This is not the gift of wisdom, but divine revelation, and Scripture is clear that Jesus fills this role for us: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Heb. 1:1-2). In addition to the office of prophet and the predictive action of prophecy is the prophesying Paul urges everyone to cultivate, preaching the gospel and its implications. The person who speaks in an unknown tongue is unintelligible, but the one who prophesies edifies, encourages, and comforts people (vv2-3). We must be ready to tell people why we are full of hope, to speak plainly of the person and work of Jesus Christ: His sinless life, vicarious death, and glorious resurrection (1 Pet. 3:15; 1 Cor. 15:3-4). This is better than untranslated truth (4-5).

Languages

Words carry content, and only if that content is understood do we receive revelation, knowledge, exhortation, or doctrine (v6). We know this even from musical instruments. If the notes on the flute or cithara are not arranged, it makes no sense and might drive you crazy. If the trumpet isn’t played to summon the army, no one is ready (vv7-8). So speech without meaning is aimless and pointless (v9). Paul says every language has meaning (v10). We’re not talking about ecstatic or frenzied utterances like the Oracle the Delphi made. Whatever language is spoken, a linguist could listen to it and write a lexicon and grammar. The Greeks called non-Greeks barbarians because they sounded like “barbarbar”, and this is not what we want to sound like to one another in church (v11-12). Therefore anyone who speaks in a different language must pray to interpret (v13). In any communication, you have the person speaking, the thing spoken, and the audience listening. The speaker should love God, love the message, and love the audience. This requires him to know what

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he is saying, which is why Paul prays with the spirit and the understanding, the same way he sings (vv14-16). It's not enough to have beautiful music; it ought to have true and rich content like the psalms model for us. If you don't understand, it's no good, or if only you understand, it's no good. You're not singing in the shower; the other is not edified (v17). None of this detracts from the wonderful gift of languages that God bestowed on the church, but five words of understanding beats 10,000 in an unknown tongue (vv18-19).

God Among Us

We must be mature instead of childish in our understanding (v20). Isaiah told Israel that since they wouldn't listen to God through the prophet in their own language, He would speak to them in a foreign tongue: "For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me" (v21; Is. 28:11-12). The Jews didn't believe Isaiah, and therefore they heard the Babylonian conquerors speaking in the streets of Jerusalem, a sign to those unbelievers that he was right (v22). We rejoice that God reversed the curse of Babel at Pentecost (Gen. 11; Acts 2). Everyone heard the gospel in his own language, and 3000 were saved (Acts 2:11-12, 41). But part of the message was that the Messiah's own people murdered Him, and many of them still mocked the message of the cross, which eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the nation being cut out of God's covenant (Acts 2:13; Matt. 24; Rom. 11:19-20). Tongues were a sign that the gospel left the Jews and went to the Gentiles, but prophecy, the exposition of the Scriptures, is for believers (v22). If Christians speak in unknown languages at church, and of course we are still talking about languages and not emotionally induced convulsion fits, if unbelievers show up won't they think we're nuts (v23)? But if all share the gospel and an unbeliever or untaught Christian comes in, he will be convinced and convicted *by all* (v24). Paul envisions personal repentance and conversion through this means, an unbelieving or unfamiliar person joining the worship service because he experiences the Lord among His people (v25). We don't craft the worship service for unbelievers, but when we worship God the way He commands, the gospel works powerfully. Lord's Day worship is so wonderful and powerful because God is among us.