

The Point and Spirit of Prophetic Gifts – *1 Corinthians 14:1-12*

Introduction – The body of Christ is made up of many and diverse members, each of whom is gifted in many and diverse ways but all for the common good of the body (Chapter 12). The gifts are given and are to be exercised out of love for the body and for the members of that body. The miracle gifts and the language-gifts were going to come to an end along with the office of apostle when their testimony was completed with the New Testament (Chapter 13). In that transition time, Paul instructs Corinth to pursue love (which will always abide) and desire the spiritual things, the things of the Spirit, but especially that they might prophesy. In Chapter 14, Paul corrects the misunderstanding and misuse of the gift of tongues and clarifies the point and spirit of the gift of prophecy. Not only is this an important chapter to help us stand against a similar misunderstanding and misuse in our day, there is also a strong exhortation for the building up of the body through a proper ministry of the Word. The public worship of God must be rooted in doctrinal truth or it will sway into superstitious emotionalism.

Better Than Untranslated Truth (vv1-5) – Chapter 13 ranked the fruit of the Spirit (faith, hope, love) above the gifts of the Spirit. Therefore, “*Pursue love*” first, “*and desire the spiritual things*” second. And when it comes to the Word-gifts, prophecy outranks tongues (v1). In verse 5 he says more explicitly that it is better to prophecy than to speak in tongues (a foreign language unknown to the speaker), unless they are interpreted (i.e. translated and explained). The reason is summarized at the end of v5, “*that the church may receive edification.*” In verse 3 the point of prophecy is made clear: “*speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.*”

Prophecy – What is it to prophesy? It can mean to bring forth a prediction of the future from the Lord. It also can mean to bring forth words from the Lord. Not all are prophets (12:29), but Paul exhorts them all to desire to prophecy (14:1). That is because another meaning of this word is to use the Word of God to edify, exhort and comfort men. In the office of preacher/teacher, a minister authoritatively preaches God’s Word. The Puritans were known to identify preaching as “sacred rhetoric” and the gift of prophecy. The preacher’s words are not inspired, but they are to be empowered by the Spirit, building upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles (Eph 2:20) “*for the edifying of the body of Christ*” (Eph 4:12).

At Corinth – Reading all of 12-14 together, Paul is not demoting tongues per se. He is counteracting a wrong-headed, over-valuation and an undisciplined practice of speaking in tongues. When he says that someone who speaks in tongues “*does not speak to men but to God*” (v2) this refers to tongues left uninterpreted. The tongue-speaker is left only edifying himself (v4). In the context of this paragraph, Paul is not commending the practice (of speaking in tongues without interpretation) for personal edification or as a prayer language. He is speaking about the need for the gifts to be used for the edification of the body. This is why later he will emphasize the necessity of interpretation (vv13, 27). Prophecy (or tongues plus interpretation) is better than untranslated truth.

Zealous for Spiritual Things for the Right Reasons (vv6-12) – The church at Corinth lacked no spiritual gift (1:7) but they were not spiritual, they were carnal (3:1). Their use of tongues was to puff themselves up, to feel spiritual, and to feel more spiritual than others, leading to factions and divisions among them. Verse 6 sets the tone. What good does it do the body if you come speaking in tongues without revelation, or knowledge, or prophesying (exhortation), or by teaching (which is doctrine)? There is no profit if there is no understanding.

Speaking into Thin Air – Paul uses some very self-evident illustrations to make his point (vv7-8). If the musical notes are not played distinctly, no one will know the tune. If we don’t know the meaning of what is being said, it is speaking into thin air (v9). Now, Paul and Corinth experienced the real manifestation of speaking in tongues (foreign languages unknown to the speaker, a la Acts 2). How much more does this illustration refute the gibberish of modern day “tongues” in our day as thin-air speaking?

Bar-Bar-Bar... – Paul is talking about languages with meaning (v10). Many of the pagan religions, including the worship of Apollo at temples located in Corinth, stirred their congregations with clashing cymbals, loud drums and screeching flutes. They would dance themselves into a frenzy (and much worse). They would sing

and shout with ecstatic utterances believing this led them into a deeper communion with their deity (H. Wayne House). With that in mind, listen to Paul. In the worship service, if one speaks like that, without meaning that we can know, he “*will be a foreigner to me*” (v11). “*Foreigner*” is literally “*barbarian*” a word the Greeks used to describe the sound of the language of a non-Greek, “bar-bar-bar.”

Excel to the Edifying of the Church – We are also to be zealous, but unlike the pagans, our zeal should lead us to excel at building up the church with the gifts God has given. You, individually, are a member of the church, and so you should experience edification individually. But that edification comes from solid teaching/preaching and the faithful (and orderly – see the rest of Chapter 14) worship of God together with the saints.

The Spirit of Prophecy – “*Worship God. For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*” (Rev 19:10 – see also Luke 24:27, John 5:39). Speaking forth from the Word of God in such a way that it turns souls to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. That spirit came upon a man directly as in the prophets of old. It is also given to a man ministerially, through the laying on of hands in ordination (1 Tim 4:14, 2 Tim 1:6), as he speaks authoritatively from the scriptures (Rom 10:14, 1 Pet 4:11). It works through all us as well as we, filled with the Spirit with the Word of God, speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Col 3:16). And so, I will shortly finish prophesying and we will pick up the Cantus and prophesy to one another. And the point of it all is to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ, not ourselves, and, as we do so, to find ourselves encouraged, exhorted, and comforted in Him.

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