

## Gifts that Build up the Body 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

We all know that some choices are difficult. Let me give you a few examples.

Would you rather be the funniest person in the room or the most intelligent?

Would you rather run at 100 mph or fly at 10 mph?

Would you rather have free Wi-Fi wherever you go or have free coffee whenever you want?

Would you rather have the ability to speak all languages or the ability to speak to every animal?

Let me stick with a choice about a gift of speaking but move my question into the realm of church.

Would you rather have the gift of speaking in tongues or the gift of prophecy? Some of you won't know what I am talking about so let me ask you the same question in a different way. Would you rather have the ability to **speak to God** in a heavenly language (That's speaking in tongues) or the ability to speak God's word **perceptively** and **precisely** to the **people around you**? (That's the gift of prophecy). Would you choose?

For the next few minutes I want to show us from **1 Corinthians chapter 14** why the gift of prophecy is greater than the gift of tongues. Both are good gifts of God. But one of them is greater than the other.

Look at verse 1. **Read verses 1-3.**

We've seen over the last couple of weeks that nothing is of any value in the life of a church **unless** the church family are driven by practical acts of love. And so isn't it wonder to be reminded of this at the beginning of chapter 14? Follow the way of love. Keep going. Keep asking the Spirit of God to work the character of the Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts.

Let's not settle for lukewarm, half-hearted apathetic acquaintances with others who attend the same church. No, let's be those who by God's Spirit are passionate about becoming people of the cross. That is people, shaped by daring and costly sacrificial love.

Paul says, follow the way of love **and** eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit.

This is so important for us to hear. There is always the danger after reading **1 Corinthians chapter 13** that we conclude that the only desire we should have as Christians is the pursuit of Christian love and that we shouldn't really bother about the gifts of the Spirit.

But this isn't what God wants. He wants us to simultaneously be eager for the Spirit to bring love and for the Spirit to bring gifts. And in **verse 1** Paul says, especially the gift of prophecy.

This is not the first time in the Bible that someone has desired that all of God's people prophesy. Do you remember what Moses said in the book of Numbers? **Numbers 11:29**, "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

What does Paul declare in 1 Corinthians? All of God's people do have the Spirit and he desires that we all prophesy.

My experience has been that there is a lot of confusion in the church about what prophecy is.

**On the one hand** you've got some Christians who when they hear the word prophecy they instantly think of a precise prediction about a future event that will happen in the world, whether good or bad. This is one view of prophecy.

**But then there are many other Christians** who when they hear the word prophecy they instantly think of preaching, when someone proclaims God's Word from the Bible to the gathered people of God.

**And then in the middle** there are loads of Christians who are really unsure and hope they will never be asked a question about it.

## What is prophecy?

The Bible never gives us a definition but it does give us lots of examples that help us to work out what is going on.

Let me highlight **two** things.

**First**, even though not every prophecy in the Bible is the same, there is something that is always the same in every prophecy.

Every prophecy involves a particular person bringing a particular Word from God to a particular group of people.

- The particular person changes.
- The way they receive the Word of God changes.
  - Sometimes it is an instantaneous hearing of the Word from God.
  - Sometimes it comes after reflection on Scripture.
  - Sometimes it comes from a dream or a vision.
- The content of the message changes. Sometimes it involves a prediction of a future event. But more often it involves bringing a pertinent truth about what God has revealed about himself to a particular group of people.

The first big thing I'd like to highlight is that every prophecy in the Bible involves a particular person bringing a particular Word from God to a particular group of people.

**Second**, New Testament prophecy is expected to be examined and weighed

In the Old Testament a prophet would speak they would often say, "This is the Word of the Lord." Their words had the imprint of God about them. They were to be listened to and obeyed as if God himself was speaking – and this is because this is exactly what God was doing.

New Testament prophecy is different. We are told not to despise it. But we are told to weigh up any words of prophecy that anyone brings.

Which means no one can come up to you, look you in the eye and tell you that their words are God's words. Apart from in one situation – when they are quoting the words of the Bible!

**What is prophecy?** It is the bringing of a particular part of God's unchanging and revealed Word to a particular group of people in a particular life situation.

The result is that they are strengthened, encouraged and comforted.

Sometimes this prophecy may involved the prediction of a future event in a person's life. However, I think we are dangerously mistaken if we equate prophecy with prediction.

No, the weight of the Biblical evidence suggests that the bulk of prophet is not about future prediction but the bringing to bear of God's past revelation to the people who are part of the present generation.

There is a terrible condition called locked in syndrome. This is when a patient is aware of their surroundings but is unable to communicate their thoughts and desires to those around them. Some people think God has this condition. As a result, religion is the response of humanity to a locked in God. It is our creation of God in the form of stories that we find helpful.

This is nonsense. The God we meet in the Bible is not locked in. He has communicated out. He is the God who speaks. The God who reveals.

We have his past communication preserved for us in the Bible. We have the amazing promise that this is not a dead book but a live book where God communicates directly with us as we read it ourselves and when we hear it read, taught and preached by someone else.

**How does prophecy fit with the final, complete and sufficient words we find in the Bible?** The bulk of prophecy is about the Spirit helping us to bring the right word from the Bible to the right person at the right time in the right way.

With this understanding in place it's not difficult to work out why Paul is so keen for all Christians to be engaged in prophecy.

Listen to verse 4. **Read verses 4 and 5.**

Please understand that prophecy is different from simply teaching truths about God. It is not just declaring revealed facts about the God who made us. No when we prophesy we are taking universal truths and applying them to particular situations.

Let me give you **an example** to illustrate what I mean.

**Should we recruit for an Associate Minister?** What are some of the truths that might be helpful to know about God. God always provides. God is generous. God is in control so risk is right. God wants his church to grow. Prophecy takes this a stage further and says – **in the light of these truths** I believe God wants us to do this. *Is this true?* The prophecy needs to be weighed by local church leaders. We don't weigh the unchanging truths about God but we do weigh up whether the implications are of the Lord.

**What does all this mean for us?**

**Not yet a Christian?** God is a passionate and clear communicator. Open up his book. Listen to the content. Why not pray that you will hear the precise bits that you need for this moment in your life?

**A Christian?** There can be no better application than repeating verse 1.  
**Read verse 1.**

Seek to be a loving prophet. Seek to be a loving brother or sister who the Spirit enables to bring the right word at the right time to the right people.

**How?** Immerse yourself in the book full of the Spirit's Words. Pray often that the same Spirit who inspired the Bible will fill our minds in the way he chooses, whether slow or fast, with the right words to effectively speak to all kinds of people in all kinds of situations in order that they will be strengthened, encouraged and comforted. **Let's pray.**