



Sermon

Inspired Words from God

1 Corinthians 14:1-5, 26-32, 39-40

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Through the summer we have followed a mini-series from the lectionary about the use of Spiritual Gifts. Roy gave a well-balanced coverage on Spiritual Gifting to start us off. He rightly emphasized that God gives his children gifts and we need to get on with using them. If you want to read it again, it is available on the church website and also printed copies are on the Welcome table.

Last week, we explored the importance of using the gifts in love for the benefit of the other person. We found that it is not enough to say we are loving – we are to be loving AND use the gifts available to us: *Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts...*¹

There also we saw that we are urged to be zealous for spiritual gifts not passively wondering if we might use them if we were to trip over them!

There is a tale that during the French Revolution, there were three Christians who were sentenced to die by the guillotine. One Christian had the gift of faith, another had the gift of prophecy, and the other had the gift of discernment.

The Christian with the gift of faith was to be executed first. He was asked if he wanted to wear a hood over his head. He declined and said he was not afraid to die. "I have faith that God will deliver me!" he shouted bravely. His head was positioned under the guillotine, with his neck on the chopping block. He looked up at the sharp blade, said a short prayer and waited confidently. The rope was pulled, but nothing happened. His executioners were amazed and, believing that this must have been an act of God, they freed the man.

The Christian with the gift of prophecy was next. His head was positioned under the guillotine blade and he too was asked if he wanted the hood.

"No," he said, "I am not afraid to die. However, I predict that God will deliver me from this guillotine!" At that, the rope was pulled and again, nothing happened. Once, again the puzzled executioners assumed this must be a miracle of God, and they freed the man.

The third Christian, with the gift of discernment, was next. He was brought to the guillotine and likewise asked if he wanted to wear a hood.

¹ 1 Cor 14:1

"No," he said, "I'm just as brave as those other two men." The executioners then positioned him face up under the guillotine and were about to pull the rope when the man stopped them. "Hey wait a minute," he said. "I think I just found the problem with your guillotine."

That's why we need the body of Christ – if only someone with the gift of wisdom had been there to help him!

This week we move onto the next section of Paul's letter where he teaches on the use of prophecy and gift of languages or 'tongues' in the worship service.

Verse 26: "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation."

It starts with an encouragement to seek the gift of prophecy. The Corinthians seem to have been excited about the gift of tongues – it does have a certain drama – and Paul spends a considerable portion of the chapter teaching that he regards prophecy as more important and valuable since it can be understood (unless the tongues message is interpreted when it becomes similarly useful).

Verse 5 *I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.*

So much of the chapter is a corrective for a problem which is not currently an issue for us. That is why I chose only portions of the chapter for today.

Tongues

Surely, it would be arrogant to imagine that any gift of God was not valuable. So, I will scan this chapter first for what we can learn about tongues from Paul, then we will concentrate on what he teaches about using prophecy.

2: For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no-one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit.

The gift is to be able to speak in a language you have not learnt. Paul suggests in 1 Cor 13:1 that these languages may be earthly or angelic – "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels..."

The gift allows us to address God with his choice of words. So we can pray what he wants without our minds editing the content down to the low level of our understanding and faith. Paul says we address God not men with tongues. They are worship or prayer.

4: He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.

Tongues is a gift which builds the speaker up. Every time you use the gift you know that you are experiencing a little miracle and that builds faith. I find that if I speak in tongues for a few minutes I am encouraged and my mood lifts and I often end up strongly praising God in English.

In Verse 5, we read that Paul would like every one of us to speak in tongues. In verse 18 he writes, "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you." So although he emphasises the greater good of prophesying, he also stresses that speaking in tongues is valuable – he used the gift a great deal himself.

How do we start speaking in tongues? I believe most if not all Christians can speak in tongues but not all will in a public setting (which is what the end of Chapter 12 refers to). Just because we can does not mean that we will of course.

For some, it happens unbidden. There are many stories of Christians who have found odd words coming to their tongues and not understood or known what to make of it. Later, they have found out it was this gift.

Firstly, you need to be a Christian. Then you ask for it and start to speak trusting God to supply the words. I remember in Finland a man came to me in a ministry time and asked for help to speak in tongues. I said, "Ask the Father for it." He said,

'What do you mean, 'Ask'?' So I pulled out a coin from my pocket and said, "Ask me for this coin." Hesitantly, he said, "Please may I have the coin?" I handed it to him. Wonder broke on his face and he said, "You mean

it is that simple?" So he asked for the gift and promptly started speaking in a language he had not learned nor understood.

Paul goes on to speak of how the use of the gift needs to be managed in a church service.

Mostly, we are to use the gift in our private prayer, but sometimes the Holy Spirit inspires us to speak out in the church service.

Verse 27 "If anyone speaks in a tongue, two--or at the most three-- should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God."

We see that Paul instructs the church that not too many people should do this – two or three is enough – so the meeting is not dominated by unintelligible words. The words should be interpreted so everyone understands what has been said. So if you believe God is prompting you to speak out in tongues you need to make sure that no more than two have already spoken and you need to think about the interpretation – is there an interpreter present – someone whom you know has the gift of interpreting tongues messages. Otherwise, Paul says you need to pray silently unless you are able to bring the interpretation yourself as he says in verse 13 "...anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says."

Prophecy

Paul tells us to desire prophecy especially, because when we prophesy we speak words inspired by God to others.

New Testament prophecy is different from Old Testament prophecy. In the Old Testament they were speaking or writing scriptures.

In New Testament times, there is the office of a prophet in Ephesians 4 which is a type of church leadership (like pastor or teacher) which would require testing, recognition and ordination. That person would carry some authority. Then there is the local prophet who has a moderately developed gift which is recognised and finally there is the ordinary prophetic word to someone else or the church which is more the level Paul is talking about in this passage. In taking part in prophecy workshops I have seen that pretty well all Christians can bring some insight from God.

In Old Testament prophecy, the words were like an arrow – "this will happen." An exacting standard was demanded. But the sort of prophecy we are talking about is not without error – Paul is clear about that when he says we prophesy in part – some will be wrong; some parts may be wrong.

Testing

In 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21, Paul wrote, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good." Just as we are not to forbid tongues we are not to be contemptuous of prophecy. But we are to test them.

Verses 3 & 4 tell us prophecies are to be strengthening, encouraging, comforting and edifying (that is building up). So if someone gives you a prophetic word which is destructive or negative, you can reject it. We test them against the Bible – God does not contradict his written word in his spoken word. We check for the witness of the Holy Spirit to the words in us. We test by submitting words to leaders for their assessment.

If everyone knows that they are to test prophecies, you can have more confidence in offering what you think God might be saying – they know to test it. It is not helpful to cloak the words with false authority, "God Almighty is telling you ..." Much better is to say, "I think God may be saying ..."

At New Wine, the person sitting beside me was praying together. The thought struck me strongly that she was a church leader. Then it dawned on me that this was a prophetic thought. So I enquired – she and her husband had been elders, I prayed some more and found words came to mind to encourage her in their situation.

If Old Testament prophecies were like an arrow, these are more like a seed – plant it, nurture it and let it grow. The words God has inspired will produce faith. We need to collaborate with that faith. There may be a crisis to test it. Nurture the prophetic word but know it will take God to fulfil it.

Delivery

Just as there was instruction on offering a tongues message, so there is for a prophetic message. Again Paul limits the number of messages to two or three in a meeting and says the others should weigh carefully what is said (v29). There should not be a competing for attention but all can take turns so everyone may be instructed and encouraged.

Verse 32: “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.” In other words, there is no lack of self-control. What is said is under control of the prophet’s mind. Any excuse or pretence of the spirit taking over is invalid in Christianity – that is the way of the kingdom of darkness.

Conclusion

When we meet, Paul expects us to seek to have something to offer the gathering.

Verse 26: When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

We have been encouraging this in the evening service especially. Perhaps you could come along tonight and have a go at contributing like that. At Top Priority meetings we often wait on the Lord to see if we sense what he is saying to us. This could happen in home groups very readily in a low key way. Sometimes, people bring a prophecy, a revelation or an interpreted tongues message in the main services. It needs good sense and grace in the offering them and putting it altogether so that as Paul says in verse 40 “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.”

Order does not necessarily mean silence or solemnity. There is an order of the graveyard; there is an order of the nursery - both may be ordered but they look quite different.

To receive an encouraging word from God is a great boost for anyone. Will you move towards earnestly seeking that you may prophesy?