

The Gift of Prophecy

1 Corinthians 14

Today we continue our study of 1 Corinthians 14 and Paul's instruction about two specific spiritual gifts. Last week we looked at speaking in tongues. Today we consider the gift of prophecy. Let me say up front that the gift of prophecy has not really been part of our practice and congregational experience here at Faith E- Free. (This reflects the background of those of us in leadership more than anything else.) Therefore, I am not addressing this issue from personal experience/knowledge. But Scripture is our authority, not our experience; so when we come to a 1 Corinthians 14 we should be eager to learn, even if what we learn challenges our experience.

As you're probably aware, the gift of prophecy is understood in a variety of different ways. I've run into three main views of prophecy. The first view is that the gift of prophecy is basically what we call preaching today; they would say that prophecy is expounding Scripture and applying it to the lives of hearers. In my understanding, this view of prophecy doesn't square with the evidence in Scripture.

The second view of prophecy is that prophets are people who see things in black and white and make strong, bold statements about what's right and wrong. In this view, the gift of prophecy is basically "telling it like it is" without much thought of whether it sounds nice or not. My guess is that this view of prophecy is a rough approximation of how the Old Testament prophets operated; they didn't beat around the bush in declaring what's right and wrong. Personally, I can't find anything in the New Testament to suggest that this understanding is what Paul had in mind when he discusses the gift of prophecy.

The third view is the one that I hold (and the view that I believe is supported by Scripture). In this view, a word of prophecy is ***a message from God to a person(s) or situation***. I'm using the general term "message" to denote a wide variety of content. Sometimes a word of prophecy was a prediction of a future event. Acts 11 records how a prophet named Agabus predicted "a great famine over all the world"; this prophecy led to the collection for the poor in Judea. More often a prophecy was a word of "encouragement or edification or consolation." The gift of prophecy suggests that there may be times when God wants to communicate a timely message to His people. This is one more expression of our interdependence in the body of Christ.

If you were with us last week, you'll remember that the big idea of 1 Corinthians 14 is that ***prophecy is preferable over tongues "in the church" (corporate worship) since intelligible speech benefits others***. Today we'll talk about the nature and value of prophecy.

In verses 1 through 5 Paul tells the Corinthians to value prophecy over tongues in the church:

1 Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. 2 For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. 3 But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. 4 One who speaks in a tongue

edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. 5 Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying.

Paul doesn't really give us a definition of prophecy in this passage. Rather, he discusses the **function** of prophecy in this passage; he tells us what prophecy is supposed to accomplish in the church. Notice what Paul said in verse 3:

3 But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.

Again, Paul is arguing why prophecy is preferable to tongues in public worship. The one who prophesies brings words of edification: they build up and strengthen others. Other times the one who prophesies speaks words of exhortation: they appeal to others to trust God and do the will of God. Other times the one who prophesies speaks words of comfort: they reassure people about God's care for them. The gift of prophecy is not unique in this; other spiritual gifts (such as teaching) fulfill these functions also. But since prophecy does these things, it is more valuable than tongues when the church is gathered. There might be occasions when God wants to speak a word of comfort/exhortation/edification to His people; He might do this through a person with the gift of prophecy.

Let's move down to verses 20 through 25. In these verses we have a fascinating (and somewhat confusing) discussion of the effect that tongues and prophecy have on both believers and unbelievers.

20 Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.

Paul says here that there is no virtue in being experienced and "mature" in the ways of evil. We should be infants when it comes to participation in evil. But we should be grown-ups when it comes to our thinking. Paul has in mind especially our thinking about our use of spiritual gifts in corporate worship. In verse 21 he gives an illustration from Isaiah 28:11. In that passage Isaiah told the people of Israel that when God spoke to them in "strange tongues" they would be experiencing God's judgment: the Assyrians will have conquered them.

21 In the Law it is written, "BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME," says the Lord.

The people in Isaiah's day should have listened to Isaiah's prophecies, but since they wouldn't God would speak to them through the Assyrians. They couldn't help but listen when they heard the "strange tongue" of the Assyrians. Paul seems to be using an OT example to impress upon the Corinthians that listening to a tongue/language you cannot understand isn't necessarily desirable. In Isaiah's day, it was a sign of God's judgment. Paul concludes:

22 So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

A sign could be positive or negative; in either case, a sign pointed to something else. The “unknown tongue” of the Assyrians was a *negative* sign to unbelievers (the people of Isaiah’s day). By contrast, prophecy is a *positive* sign to believers. Through words of prophecy God pointed them toward righteousness and truth. Notice again that Paul’s concern is the effect of tongues on those who don’t have that gift:

23 Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; 25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

If an unbeliever enters a gathering of Christians and hears them speaking in an unknown tongue, he will think that they’re “mad” or possessed. But if that same person enters and hears a word of prophecy – a message from God – s/he may just experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit. That word of prophecy may reveal the secrets of his heart. That word of prophecy may just be the thing that God uses to convince him/her that the living God is among them. This is one more reason to prefer prophecy over tongues in public worship.

Verse 26 emphasizes once again the importance of doing only those things that edify/build up others in worship. We looked at verses 27 and 28 last week: if you must have tongues in public worship, it should be limited to 2 or 3 people and then only with an interpretation. Verse 29 makes clear that the type of prophecy Paul is talking about is very different from prophecy in the Old Testament. Notice what Paul says:

29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

This never would have been said of prophecy in the Old Testament: “Listen to Jeremiah and then pass judgment on what he says . . .” No, a prophet spoke a message from God that was fully authoritative; they were to believe and obey what the prophet said. The new covenant heirs to the OT prophets are not those with the gift of prophecy but the apostles (in the narrower sense of the original 12 apostles minus Judas, plus Paul). The apostles were the ones who spoke with the authority of God, not people with the gift of prophecy.

I think you can see that Paul is describing something very different than OT prophecy here. The presupposition here is that the prophet is fallible – that his/her message might contain error. For that reason, Paul says, “Let the others pass judgment” on what the prophet says. Read Acts 21 sometime. There you’ll find that there were some who “kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.” Paul apparently disregarded that word of prophecy (it’s not called a prophecy, but that’s the clear implication of “through the Spirit”). Later in Acts 21 we read that

when Paul was in Caesarea a prophet told him that if he went to Jerusalem he would be bound and delivered over to the Gentiles. Those who heard this prophecy begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but he went anyway. Apparently the prophet communicated the right message, but the people who heard it took away the wrong application of it. Paul was convinced that it was the will of God to go to Jerusalem and die if necessary.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 Paul expressed this same basic approach to prophecy:

19 Do not quench the Spirit; 20 do not despise prophetic utterances. 21 But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.

Here again Paul affirms the goodness of prophecy; it is not to be despised as something wrong or harmful. At the same time NT prophets are not infallible. Those who are spiritual are to “examine everything carefully” and “hold fast to that which is good.” Paul is allowing that a prophetic utterance might contain both truth and error. Words of prophecy were not supposed to be uncritically accepted and believed. A “prophetic utterance” is clearly not on par with Scripture – which is authoritative and infallible.

Paul’s instruction to submit words of prophecy to the evaluation of others is so very wise because the gift of prophecy is so easily (and often) abused. Think about it: it’s a rather heady thing to “get messages from God.” You’re probably familiar with incidents such as when a famous TV preacher received the prophecy that “unless you send me millions of dollars, God going to ‘take me home.’” That’s the type of message that would be good to submit to others who know God well. They may say, “Maybe . . . But what you’re saying seems to be inconsistent with the character of God. That actually sounds manipulative. That actually sounds like blackmail.” Paul’s instruction is a needed corrective to the way prophecy is often practiced today. Sometimes people get “spooked” when somebody says, “God told me . . .”; they don’t challenge it. But Paul advocated evaluating and passing judgment on prophetic utterances.

Notice in verse 30 that Paul describes the message of the prophet as “a revelation”:

30 But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent.

The fact that the prophet’s message is a revelation suggests that it isn’t the same thing as wisdom or discernment. A “revelation” is simply something that has been revealed – something that isn’t understood through normal powers of observation and reasoning. This is why I would describe prophecy as a message from God. Paul’s point here is that prophecy should be done in an orderly, respectful fashion.

31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; 32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; 33 for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

As we saw with tongues, prophecy is under the control of the prophet. The person with the gift of prophecy receives and communicates a message from God to a person or a situation.

Toward a wise, biblical use of the gift of prophecy: If you're moving "toward" a destination, it means that you haven't arrived there yet. As I mentioned earlier, prophecy has not been part of our congregational experience. Most of us are much more familiar with the abuses than with the benefits of the gift of prophecy. But – like tongues – Paul clearly describes it as a good gift from God. So, it seems to me that a local church should move toward a wise, biblical use of the gift of prophecy. It's not the type of thing you can or should force, but it does seem to me that a church can either block out and effectively eliminate a gift such as prophecy or it can put itself in a position to experience the gift of prophecy as God leads. It seems to me that Paul is advocating the latter position. I believe that Paul gives ample instruction on how the gift of prophecy should be practiced to safeguard against the abuses that are commonly associated with this gift.

For a church to move toward a wise, biblical use of the gift of prophecy, the first issue is that of ***desire***. Throughout 1 Corinthians 14 Paul is trying to stimulate their desire for the gift of prophecy – especially over the gift of tongues. In verse 1 Paul wrote, "... desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy." In verse 39 Paul writes, "Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues." And so it seems to me that Paul is wanting them to desire the gift of prophecy in their midst because of its value "for edification and exhortation and consolation" (v. 5).

We'll talk about desiring spiritual gifts in general next week. But in relation to prophecy, it makes sense that some within a local church would desire the gift of prophecy. It would be up to God to give that gift according to His will. The motivation for such a gift isn't power or prestige; it's a humble desire for the body of Christ to receive everything God might want to communicate. Prophecy is simply one way that God might want to guide or encourage or comfort His people.

The second issue I'll mention is ***context***. If a local church were moving toward a wise, biblical use of the gift of prophecy, it seems to me that the place to begin is NOT on a Sunday morning with a room full of people, many of whom don't know each other. Paul wrote his letters to churches who met in homes. Presumably, everybody (or almost everybody) there knew each other. We get the impression that those with the gift of prophecy had been identified and were therefore recognized by the rest of the church.

It seems preferable for such gifts to surface in the context of a smaller group of believers who know each other well. In that context, if a person thinks s/he has the gift of prophecy, it can easily be evaluated. The person can submit the word of prophecy and let others pass judgment. Over time the gift of prophecy might be confirmed and then used in a larger context. That's compatible with the way other spiritual gifts are surfaced. In that context, a person with the gift of prophecy might be able to communicate a message from God that might bring great comfort or encouragement to someone.

The third issue is **authority**. Implicit in 1 Corinthians 14 is the truth that Paul as an apostle had authority over those with the gift of prophecy. Paul wrote and told them in verses 37 and 38:

37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. 38 But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

Paul told them basically, “If you don’t abide by what I’m saying, I don’t care if you think you have the gift of prophecy or if you think you’re the most spiritual person on the planet. You have no platform in the church.” Paul, as an apostle had authority that those with the gift of prophecy didn’t have.

It is on this basis that we understand that the Scriptures – which were written by the apostles and those close to the apostles – are our authority in the church. A person with the gift of prophecy (or teaching or wisdom or discernment or any other gift) needs to submit to the authority of the Word. Any word of prophecy should be measured against Scripture and rejected if it is found to be inconsistent or contrary to Scripture. Paul has put into place safeguards to ensure that the authority of the apostles’ teaching isn’t violated.

It seems to me that a church that wants to move toward a wise, biblical use of the gift of prophecy needs to move cautiously but in faith. As I said last week, all of God’s gifts are good gifts. Therefore, it is a good thing if God wants to encourage and comfort His people through the gift of prophecy.