

“Tongues and Prophecy”
1 Corinthians 12:31a; 14:1-20
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Introduction:

The problem with preaching on chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians is that it is so easy to make everyone unhappy. This is basically true of most pastors most of the time. But on a passage like this it is more like a certainty. You know how it is, if I say “this” then these people will be happy and “those” people will be made. No matter how familiar, being caught in the middle is no fun.

Nevertheless, I take great encouragement from the fact that one of my theological heroes in the faith, J. I. Packer, has disappointed many in relation to his treatment of the Holy Spirit. I often recommend his book on the topic, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*. But I read this week what another scholar said about his treatment of chapter 14, and on tongues in particular. Packer’s conclusions are not without significance, yet it was the comment on his work that illustrated how difficult it is to explain chapter fourteen. It read, “I cannot think of a better way of displeasing both sides of the debate.” (Carson, p. 84.) Whatever Packer’s goals were, we can be sure that he did not set out to displease everyone. But, that is exactly what this scholar concluded.

So, we tread this morning on some difficult ground. Consider the reasons...

- **Controversy:** Christians often divide over these issues into the wrongly named “charismatic” camp and the “cessationist” camp. That is, Christians divide into groups that have certain commitments regarding the role of the Spirit in the life of the Church.

Even before we get started, we can make a few comments about this division. It tends to be fed on stereotypes and caricatures. For example, I don’t know any cessationists who denounce the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, there are very few “charismatics” who believe the Scripture is an open book. Still, stereotypes persist. Why? Isn’t it because they ensure the controversy continues and even deepens because we want to avoid the hard work of thoughtful reflection?

- **Confusion:** Of course, some of you are not Christians. You just want to be able to try on Christianity to see if it is credible. Yet, when faced with the whole chaos of charismatic discussion, it can be a bit bewildering. For you, the simple notion of divine revelation is challenging. Has God spoken? Anywhere? That a “word from the Lord” would be delivered in some sort of fantastical, non-rational way like tongues is all the stranger, even distressing.

So, what do we do? Well, what we need is clarity. Clarity to lesson the controversy and clear up the confusion; clarity is what I hope to provide for us this morning. Yet, I know that the clarity that can be given will not completely explain every, dangling detail. In other words, I truly think we can get clarity on the “big picture” of chapter fourteen about tongues and prophecy.

Here’s my disclaimer. I do know that there will remain some loose ends and issues about which we will not all agree. Some of you, no doubt, will be disappointed. Nevertheless, even if we cannot draw exhaustive conclusions, we can make substantial progress.

1) Clearing the field

One way to approach this discussion is a field that you want to sow crops, but it is beset with two problems: the weeds and the rocks. Before you can sow the seed, you must clear the field of these two unwanted aggravation. In fact, I would go so far as to say that 80% of the controversy and confusion we feel is related to these pests that have gotten in our way. Well, what are these weeds? These nuisances? These aggravations?

a) Supernaturalism of the Holy Spirit

Many people believe that if you don't think all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit continue today, then you do not believe in the supernatural movement of the Spirit. This is patently not true. As we learned a few weeks ago, all of the gifts of the Spirit are "charismatic," that is they are gifts of grace. Moreover, the gifts are given differently to God's people according to God's sovereign purpose.

We need to remember that the gifts of the Spirit both...

- **Signify that Kingdom of God has come** with the advent of Jesus Christ. The gifts of the Spirit testify that Jesus really is the long-awaited Messiah. He's here! We see the signify-ing character of the gifts of the Spirit during Jesus' ministry and the apostles' ministry.
- Many people would say that this signify-ing character of the spectacular gifts is their only purpose. However, that seems to go too far. **We must remember that the gifts of the Spirit also serve the extension of the Kingdom.** The gifts are given to ensure that the Kingdom of Christ will advance into all the earth.

While the signifying character of the gifts seems to be more in focus in the Gospels, that the gifts serve the purpose of the Kingdom is definitely the focus in 1 Corinthians. **The gifts are given to build up the church (12:7).**

At the same time, though, we must remember that at least one gift does not continue—the gift of apostleship. In fact, I think we can all agree that those gifts or aspects of gifts that were unique to the foundation of the church have by necessity passed. Otherwise, we would still be pouring the foundation, rather than building upon it. **If this is not true, then there is no adequate reason for us to believe that the canon is closed or that the Bible is sufficient.**

Nevertheless, and this is very important, to recognize the foundational character of the apostles does not make our Christian lives any less supernatural. Because none of us are apostles does not make our Christian lives inferior to theirs or less filled with the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, it is deeply misguided to suggest that certain people are less supernatural in the Spirit because they believe certain gifts no longer continue today.

b) Individualism rampant in our culture

Many of us when we talk about the gifts of the Spirit immediately begin to reflect our on our personal experience of the Spirit. We equate the Holy Spirit with personal encounters. We relate the Holy Spirit as though he is our personal coach or mentor. To be sure, the Spirit is given to assure of Christ's love. Yet, the way in which many of us privatize salvation and specifically the ministry of the Holy Spirit reflects more of our individualistic culture than it does Christianity. There are **two every important reasons** why we should not approach the Holy Spirit in such an individualistic way.

- **All of the imperatives in this chapter are in the second person plural.** That is, these commands are given to the whole church. The "church" as a body is to seek the higher gifts and pursue love. Paul's commandments cannot be read as though each individual should seek an identical experience of the Spirit as someone else.
- **We must not forget that Pentecost was an event like the crucifixion and resurrection.** Theologically, this is confusing redemptive history with personal salvation history. Many folks think that unless you have had your own personal Pentecost and been "second-blessed" or "filled with the Spirit" that you are somehow defective. Such teaching inevitably creates two-tiers of Christians—the Spiritual and non-spiritual. The

truth is all believers in Jesus Christ have the Holy Spirit. We cannot believe in Jesus unless the Holy Spirit has come upon us!

The important point though, is this: what the Spirit is doing is collectively building up the Church. The Spirit is not creating Holy Spirit superstars or Holy Spirit gurus. Anybody who teaches that reflects the culture rather than Christ.

Again, if we get those two things right 80% of our debate goes away. When we get these things right the ground work for loving one another regardless of our conviction has been laid. But, I also think we can make substantial progress!

2) Seeking the gifts (12:31a; 14:1)

Still, Paul says it twice, "...earnestly desire the higher gifts" (12:31). And, in 14:1, "...earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you prophecy." What does he mean?

In chapter fourteen, Paul's treatment of spiritual gifts turns to almost exclusively dealing with the use and misuse of tongues and prophecy. I think the best way to understand Paul's comments is that he wants the Corinthians to value prophecy over tongues. But why?

- **Prophecy builds up, but tongues cannot unless it is interpreted**
- **Prophecy instructs, but tongues cannot unless it is interpreted**

According to Paul, the Corinthians had taken the spectacular, yet not understandable practice of tongues-speaking to be preferred. Essentially, Paul says, "Stop committing this error." Importantly, he does not say, "Stop speaking in tongues." His concern is stewardship of the gifts, not their elimination.

Don't you wish this was all that needed to be said? Of course, we all want to know what Paul means by prophecy and tongues. That is really, really hard to be completely clear about. So, what can we be clear on?

a) Prophecy

- Most usages of the word in Scripture refer to Divine revelations of God. Prophecy would have advanced the Corinthians understanding of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom. In other words, these prophecies were by "prophets." They were infallible and authoritative for the people of God.
- It is quite possible or even likely, that some of what was being called prophecy was more akin to encouraging speech and insightful applications of already existing words of Scripture (14:3).

Paul could be speaking about both of these things, because surely both were present in Corinth. However, we know that the first form of prophecy has come to a conclusion with the close of the Canon. We might call that prophecy with a capital "P". However, there is no reason to think this second aspect of prophecy, relating to insightful applications of the Scripture, sudden, even remarkable applications for our lives, etc. has come to a close. How many of us give thanks for a spirit-filled sermon or a timely encouragement or even rebuke from a friend. Should we not recognize such things for what they are—gifts of the Spirit? In addition, while such things do not carry the same authority or claim of infallibility that capital "P" prophecy takes, such things are analogous to prophecy and remain with us today.

Illustration: I think this sort of thing occurs regularly at RPC during our Pastor's Forum. In this setting, we have a continuation of the ministry of the Spirit, yet we have the privilege of hearing from members of the Body of Christ. I am often very encouraged by the insights the Lord gives to our membership and attenders. I often go away feeling as though the most illuminating portion of God's instruction that day came from someone else's lips.

My only caution is that none of us should ever claim to speak for the Lord or listen to one who makes that claim.

b) Tongues-speaking

This one is tougher. Of this we can be clear: Tongue speaking, then or now, is not a sign of someone's deeper spirituality or greater maturity. This is Paul's concern and he absolutely restricts it b/c it is born of religious pride.

Of these things we can be less clear....

- Tongue speaking was using a foreign language, which the speaker did not know...
- Or, tongue speaking was using an angelic language, which the speaker did not know.
- Or, tongue speaking was some irrational, free-vocalization similar to contemporary tongues-speaking practices.

Here's why I think options one and two are more likely. Interpretability (12:5). Paul seems to think that tongues became prophecy when someone had the gifts of interpretation (14:27-28). And, his word for interpretation basically means what any of us would mean when we interpret a language. In other words, he's dealing with rational language—either heavenly or earthly.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the contemporary practice has no value. Millions of people testify to being blessing by free-vocalization. There is no need to object to this if we keep a few things in mind.

Many of us have devotional practices that we would were "gifts" of the Lord, yet we would not recognize them as gifts in the more technical sense. I'm sure many of you journal during your devotionals, yet not all do. Others of you pray while you walk, but not all of you do. There is no rule about such things. God gives us grace to privately practice our devotion to him, as long as it is governed ultimately by his Word.

Finally, what of "interpretation"? What if someone claims that today? Well, we would have to test it against the Scriptures and put it in that other category of illumination or insight into God's word.

Prophecy instructs, but tongues cannot unless it is interpreted

3) Thinking maturely (14:1a; 18-20)

We don't have time to dig into Paul's warning in verses 18-20. However, his comment about evil reminds us that it is possible to commit great error, even evil, when we do not steward God's gifts in accordance with love. It is for this reason, that chapter 13 rests b/w chapters 14 and 12. Only as we live according to the dictates of love will we be able to steward the gifts given by the Spirit.

Only love can turn would-be ministerial superstars into servants and shy, insecure Christians to stand up and use their gifts with joy.

Conclusion:

I still ask the question, "So, what?" There are really two conclusions we must avoid: 1) Counterfeiting the Spirit and turning his ministry into some sort of traveling show; 2) Closing our eyes to the ministry of the Spirit. It is hard for me to know which is more dangerous for our church. Regardless, I think there is one thing we can do together as a church and that is pray for the Holy Spirit to come and fill us and make us alive to the presence of Jesus.

Come Holy Spirit. Fill us so that we might reach the maturity in Christ, for which your grace supplies. Equip us Spirit so that we might worship you, serve one another and love the people of our city. Dispel our doubts of your power. Deliver us from those who dismiss your presence. Protect us from those who counterfeit your ministry. Above all, show us Jesus and lift him up in our midst!