

God speaks love

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Pastor Wyley Jenkins, Jr.

When we lived in Colombia, we worked with Indigenous tribes. Many were refugees of the war in Colombia. One particular family was threatened by the FARC guerillas in the area for refusing to plant coca. They had to flee for their lives and came to the city we lived in. Through some amazing circumstances, this family began to study the Bible at our house. The woman of the family was named Albita. Twenty years before meeting us, this indigenous tribal family had had a missionary living in their village for about one year. That missionary had given a Bible in Spanish to Albita because she could speak a little Spanish. Albita told us that the first night she had the Bible, she had fallen asleep holding it. That night she had a dream. In the dream, she saw birds come and take the Bible from her hands and rip it to pieces. She interpreted the dream by thinking the spirits of the jungle were warning her to stay away from the Bible. As I prepared to share the very first Bible story with them, I prayed to God. I said something like, "Please Jesus, give me the right story to share with them." Over the next few days I settled on teaching a famous parable of Jesus, called the parable of the sower. In the parable, Jesus compares his words to seeds and our hearts to different types of soils. He says that the birds come to snatch away the seeds and explains that this is symbolic for the devil stealing the word of God from our hearts. Albita was amazed and remembered the dream she had had 20 years prior. She said that she finally understood that the birds in her dream were trying to steal God's words from her heart. Albita is a born-again Christian that is very evangelistic today. After that first Bible study, she never turned back.

How did I know which story to pick? I am not sure why I do some things. But sometimes I just know God is leading to do or say something. Have you ever had that feeling? Could God really lead people in that way? I really feel to encourage you all today that God talks. He communicates with his children. It may not be in words that are audible, but he talks. We really need to recognize his voice. He will speak in many different ways. You can have a personal relationship with him. If you go to the Bible to read a book, you will find a book, but if you go to the Bible to meet God, you will meet Him. This passage was written to the Corinthians almost 2,000 years ago. In it, the Apostle Paul assumes that they knew what the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy are. But for us, 2,000 years later, it might not be as clear. So we should start by briefly explaining prophecy and tongues.

What was Prophecy in the New Testament, and what was happening in Corinth?

When asked to make decisions in complicated times, I was taught to begin by asking "what am I sure I do not want". Sometimes it is helpful to know what something is not. So here are three things that prophecy is not:

1. Prophecy is not exactly the same as preaching, though preaching can contain prophecy

It is interesting that all throughout the New Testament, the words having to do with preaching and prophecy are different, but there are a few times when they seem to overlap. Preaching was the puritan way of talking about prophesying. When they held meetings with non-stop preaching, there were called the prophesying. Many Pastors today teach the same. But there are clearly many times in which the prophecy in the Bible is not the same thing as a sermon. At times the prophet tells the future. That is not a normal sermon. However, I can say that at times preachers experience the sense that they need to say something. This is where preaching and prophesying might overlap, and even without us knowing. It is clear that prophecy and sermon are not the same thing.

2. Prophecy is not the same as fortune-telling

There are times when God, in His grace, tells us the future, but most of the prophecy in the Old Testament is not telling about the future. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart in their book titled *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* say, "Less than 2 percent of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5 percent specifically describes the new covenant age. Less than 1 percent concerns events yet to come in our time." Every part tells about Jesus. What it does say clearly is that if the only idea you have of a Prophet is someone telling the future you are mistaken. Many times, it was delivering a message from something God had clearly said he would do. So Isaiah or Jeremiah might function like encouragers or prosecutors or whatever else God was saying.

3. All Christians do not agree on exactly what New Testament prophecy is

Some say it has ended. If prophecy is the very voice of God, and God has already spoken to us in the Bible, then why do we need prophets? Others argue that God still speaks through prophets, but it is not the same as the scriptures. But others say both are true. In one sense, the Bible is finished. It is once for all handed down to the saints (Jude 1:3), and there is no need to add or take away from it. But in another sense, don't we all at times hear one sentence out a 1,000 and say without a doubt that God is talking to us? Don't we all feel at times like we need to tell somebody something or that we need to go somewhere? Is that prophecy? In the book of Acts 2:15-18, Peter says to the crowd:

***"¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day.
¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy."***

In the Old Testament times, only some people had the Spirit, and therefore only some could really hear God for themselves. In the New Testament, God is speaking to each and every person. Even more so for us. They had the Bible on scrolls that were very expensive and difficult to get. We have easy

access to God's Word and the Spirit. Dr. Wayne Grudem believes that this new moving of the Spirit through Jesus changes the gift of prophecy. Prophets in the Old Testament find their equivalent in the Apostles. What he means is that when you questioned Moses, you were swallowed up; Jeremiah, and you were destroyed; and if you question the Apostles, you are not a part of the faith. But the prophets in the New Testament are different. Just look at a few verses with me where they were questioned:

“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.” (1 Corinthians 14:29)

Could you imagine Jesus, Moses, Peter or Paul speaking and others saying "weigh or evaluate what he is saying"?

“Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:19)

How could you tell a person to test a prophecy and hold on to what is good? Evidently, some people were despising prophecy. Like many people in our time, it was probably done very wrongly. Paul warns them not to throw it away.

“And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” (Acts 21:4)

Here Paul actually disobeys a prophet about going to Jerusalem. This is not the same as a person would do with the Old Testament Prophets.

It almost seems like new Testament prophecy is some sort of impression, feeling or message that we could be compelled to say, while at the same time not always knowing exactly what it means.

So, prophecy in the New Testament is much less specific and not anywhere close to the authority of the Bible or its writers. Paul says that prophecy is good for encouragement, consolation and upbuilding. He says that if an unbeliever hears a true prophecy, then the secrets of his heart will be exposed, and he will fall on his face and declare that God is really among you. I will explain more of this below. Let's move from Prophecy to Tongues.

What is the spiritual gift of Tongues?

The gift of tongues appears in Acts 2,10 & 19 and in 1 Corinthians 12-14. There are at least three ways tongues appear in the New Testament:

- 1.** They are foreign languages not naturally known by the speaker, heard by others who speak that language (Acts 2, 10 &19).
- 2.** They are foreign languages not naturally known by the speaker that someone who is spiritually enabled, or the speaker himself, can interpret (1 Corinthians 12-14).
- 3.** They are a way to pray or sing to God in private for personal edification (1 Corinthians14:2, 4 & 15).

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

So let's look at the text. Paul first explained the gifts of the Holy Spirit in chapter 12. Then in chapter 13, he explains that love is truly the important spiritual characteristic, but Paul still has not really addressed their concerns. The Corinthians wanted to know how to order the worship service. Paul spends the next 25 verses detailing why they should seek to prophesy more than to speak in tongues. He has already said clearly in 12:7 that the gifts are for the common good. Now he explains why the gift of prophecy is greater than tongues. Tongues, while being important for the church, are not something that edifies the whole body. Verse 2 teaches that Tongues are directed at God, while Prophecy is directed at people, but that only means that God is the only one who can understand a tongue without interpretation. In a church service, you should normally pick to do what is the most loving thing for the most amount of people. That is why prophecy in a known language is more loving than tongue in a language no one understands.

1. Earnestly desire to build up others in church service (v.1-5).
2. Speaking in tongues without an interpreter doesn't build up others (v.6-19).
3. Speaking in a way people can understand is better for believers and unbelievers (v.20-25).

1. Earnestly desire to build up others in church service

Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. There are usually two wrong ways of thinking about these mysterious types of spiritual manifestations like tongues and prophecy. The first is the one who sees that there are liars and fakes and says, "I am finished with this" and "these people are fake". This kind of person has seen the damage done through tongues or prophecy or extreme manifestations. But Paul says we should not think like this. Paul tells the Corinthians who were like that to earnestly desire spiritual gifts. If a child goes and plays in the mud and gets very dirty, the mother takes the child and puts him in the bath. Now the bathwater is very dirty. Imagine that the mud is bright red. Will the mother see the child in the dirty water and throw both out? Paul says that we need to be able to pick out the baby of the spiritual gifts and flush the bathwater of lies. Can you do that? That is one way of seeing it.

But there is another kind of person on the opposite side of the issue. The second type is someone who is looking for a spiritual experience. People who use drugs speak of getting high. They are looking for the effect of the drugs. This second kind of mistaken person is looking for a spiritual high. They are seeking some kind of spiritual experience. Do you know what is wrong with that? This person is not trying to build up others. He or she is self-seeking. Paul says in verse 23: ***"If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?"*** Don't be spiritually selfish people won't think you are cool they will think you are crazy.

Verse 5 says that the ***"The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up."*** This means that the person with the gift that helps others is of greater importance on Sunday morning than the one who only helps himself.

2. Speaking in tongues without an interpreter doesn't build up others

"⁶ Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?"

Paul helps us understand that he is not only speaking of prophecy as being good for Sundays, but also teaching. In verse 6, he mentions two types of gifts in four words: ***"revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching."*** When a prophet receives a revelation, it comes to people in a prophecy. When someone is knowledgeable about the word of God, it comes as a teaching. This is important because it lets us know that Paul is not only saying the gift of prophecy is good for the church. He is saying gifts that communicate. He gives three examples of means of communication that, unless there is understanding, are not helpful. First, he mentions musical instruments. Could you imagine if I said to a group of 5-year-olds, "Hey, why don't you little guys come up here and play the instruments for the church?" You would laugh for about 10 seconds and then you would get aggravated by the horrible sound of all the instruments in disorder. The same is true for tongues in a church service. It is like an instrument that does not play a song. It is not a blessing. The second illustration is a bugle. That is a trumpet-like instrument. In Bible times, each people and city would use horns or bugles to signal to the people what to do. One type of sound from the bugle would lead to war and another to gather the people together. But if the sound was not understood, it would not benefit people.

Lastly, Paul speaks of foreign languages. *Mera name Wyley he. Meri Hindi buhot karab he.* I just said, "My name is Wyley, and my Hindi is really bad." But if you don't understand, how can it benefit you, unless I interpret? So Paul is going to be so clear that unless there is an interpreter of that tongue, there should not be tongue-speaking in church. In verse 12, he repeats the main theme again:

"¹² So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church."

Do you come to church eager to build up the church? Here is my challenge to you. Let's not be a buffet church. In a buffet, the different foods are for different dishes, and they don't mix. There are Americans over here, Nigerians over there, and Filipinos over there. They really don't mix like the food at a buffet. But God wants a salad. He wants a mix. Here is what I want you to do today. I want every person here, after the service ends, to go talk with some person you don't know for 3 minutes. Ask each other a few questions. Don't be a buffet, build other up.

I want to mention one thought I had in passing about verses 14-15:

"¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also."

I just want to point out that Paul only has two ways to pray or sing. He prays or sings in a normal language with his mind, or he prays or sings in a tongue, but that is done in the Spirit. There is no place for praying and not paying attention. There is no place for mumbling the songs. Some of us don't really sing. Some of us don't really pray. We mumble. We think about something else. Like me when I sing a song in Hindi. In Hindi I just mumble the parts I don't know. My children laugh at me. But I mumble. Don't be a mumbler. If you pray, pray with your mind, and if you sing, sing with your mind. Paul ends the section with a really strong statement:

"¹⁹ Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue."

3. Speaking in a way people can understand is better for believers and unbelievers

"²⁰ Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. ²¹ In the Law it is written, 'By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.' ²² Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. ²³ If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you."

This is a really beautiful thought. Can God talk directly to people? Can he disclose the secrets of men's hearts? Charles Spurgeon was an English Baptist preacher who lived 150 years ago. He was famous for his ability to speak. But he tells several stories that I think are as closest to modern day examples of prophecy I have seen. In his autobiography, he tells of a service where he was preaching and in the middle of the sermon he said:

"'Young man, those gloves you are wearing have not been paid for; you have stolen them from your employer.' At the close of the service, a young man, looking very pale and greatly agitated, came to the room where I was and begged for a private interview with me. On being admitted, he placed a pair of gloves upon the table, and tearfully said, 'It's the first time I have robbed my master, and I will never do it again. You won't expose me, sir, will you? It would kill my mother if she heard that I had become a thief.' The young man knelt then and there and came to Jesus."

I am no Spurgeon, but there are times that any preacher or teacher can tell you that they said or did something and it touched people in a special way. There are times when I feel like I need to send a bible verse or pray for a person or share something. Brothers, it is always safe to share an encouraging Bible verse. Seek to build people up, and God will use you in an amazing way.