

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Comparing Prophecy and Tongues**

*1 Corinthians 14:1-5*

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January 15, 2012

# Comparing Prophecy and Tongues

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of spiritual gifts. Let's learn about more about that in a message I am calling, "Comparing Prophecy and Tongues."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 14:1-5:

**<sup>1</sup>Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. <sup>2</sup>For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. <sup>3</sup>On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. <sup>4</sup>The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. <sup>5</sup>Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. (1 Corinthians 14:1-5)**

## Introduction

In his commentary on *I & II Corinthians* Richard Pratt tells the story about a time when a friend called him on the phone and said, "Richard, I've got some money. Do you want it?"

They talked for a while about the kinds of ministry opportunities for which the money could be used. In the end, Dr. Pratt's friend gave him a large check and it was devoted to the work of the kingdom.

Several years later Dr. Pratt saw his friend and thanked him again for the blessing he was to him. "Thank you for your gift," Dr. Pratt said. "We're using it to serve a lot of people."

Dr. Pratt's friend responded in a way true to his Christian character. "That's what money is for," he replied.

He believed that. God had given him success and money, but he understood that God's gifts are to be used in service of others.<sup>1</sup>

God had given the Corinthians many spiritual gifts. These were to be used to build up the whole congregation, but they did not know how to use them properly. So Paul gave them some very practical instructions in chapters 12 – 14 to help them use their spiritual gifts properly and to maintain orderly worship services.

Today's church, like the Corinthian church, is full of gifted people. Yet, like the Corinthians many of us do not know how to use our gifts properly to build others up. We need to learn from chapter 14 that we must use our spiritual gifts not for personal fulfillment, but to build up the church and to present a godly witness to the world.

## Lesson

So, in today's lesson, we learn that spiritual gifts build up the church.

Let's learn about this as follows:

1. Pursue Love (14:1a)
2. Earnestly Desire the Spiritual Gifts (14:1b)
3. Tongues Does Not Build Up the Church (14:2, 4a)
4. Prophecy Does Build Up the Church (14:3, 4b)
5. Prophecy Is Greater Than Tongues (14:5)

### I. Pursue Love (14:1a)

First, pursue love.

Paul summarized the entire previous chapter 13 with one command in verse 1a: **"Pursue love."**

The Greek word for **pursue** (*dioko*) means "to do something

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<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 243.

with intense effort and with definite purpose or goal.”<sup>2</sup> Above all else, the Corinthians were to **pursue love**. Lack of love for one another was their greatest problem, and all of the challenges that the Corinthian church faced was related in one way or another to their lack of love for each other.

Jesus once said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” And, continuing, he said, “And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

I love what Peter said about loving one another, especially when we sin against one another, which we do often. He said, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

I was talking with someone recently about how we sometimes sin against each other and hurt one another. However, we also noted that only in the church—and not in the world—do we see love covering a multitude of sins.

But, even though love is primary, and even though love is the only gift that will exist in heaven, that does not mean that everything else is to be disregarded.

## II. Earnestly Desire the Spiritual Gifts (14:1b)

Second, earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.

Paul said in verse 1b: “. . . **and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.**”

Love is the motivation for every spiritual gift. That was Paul’s point in chapter 13. Chapter 13 is not a digression, as some commentators argue. Chapter 13, the great love chapter, is important because Paul wanted his readers to know that love is the true motivation for the proper use of every spiritual gift.

Paul was now picking up where he had left off at the end of

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<sup>2</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, elec. ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1996), 662.

chapter 12. He said in 1 Corinthians 12:31a, “But earnestly desire the higher gifts.” The Corinthians’ desire for using spiritual gifts was not wrong in itself. But it was wrong in that they were using their spiritual gifts for personal fulfillment. They were using their spiritual gifts in a way that puffed up the individual user and did not build up the church. So, Paul said, “But earnestly desire the higher gifts.”

But before, he explained what the “higher gifts” were, Paul said to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 12:31b, “And I will show you a still more excellent way.” The still more excellent way was the way of love, which Paul wrote about in chapter 13. All spiritual gifts, Paul was saying, are to be motivated and fueled by love. That is, love for others and not love for self is what motivates the proper use of spiritual gifts.

So, now in 1 Corinthians 14:1b Paul continued with what he said at the end of chapter 12. He now said in verse 1b, “. . . **and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.**”

Believers, motivated by love for others, are to use their spiritual gifts to build up the church. And what **spiritual gifts** did Paul have in mind? Well, he told us at the end of verse 1: “. . . and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, **especially that you may prophesy.**”

It is very important to note that the phrase “**that you may prophesy**” is actually in the plural form, although one cannot detect that from the English version. Nevertheless, in Greek it is in the plural form, and that is very significant. Paul did not mean that each individual Christian should desire to prophesy but rather that the whole church should desire that the gift of prophesy be used in the congregation. In other words, the church as a whole should desire that spiritual gift of prophecy be used to build up the church.

Now, why did Paul say that?

### **III. Tongues Does Not Build Up the Church (14:2, 4a)**

Third, Paul urged them to desire the spiritual gift of prophecy

because tongues does not build up the church.

Paul said in verse 2a: **“For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God.”**

The type of tongues that the Corinthians practiced had no edifying value at all. According to Paul, it **speaks not to men**. It did not instruct, and it certainly did not build up the church at all.

The tongues that the Corinthians spoke could only speak **to God**. Now, some commentators say that this is some kind of a prayer language or a private language that the Corinthians spoke. However, I do not believe that this is the case. Here’s why.

A better translation for **“to God”** is “to a god.” In the Greek text here in verse 2a there is no definite article with God. Usually, “God” (with a capital “G”) in the Greek text has a definite article, whereas “god” (with a small letter “g”) does not have a definite article. That is how “God” is distinguished from “a god.”

Another reason why the Greek should be translated as “a god” is because the Bible never records believers speaking to God in anything other than normal, intelligible language. Even in Jesus’ high priestly prayer in John 17 when deity communed with deity, the language used was normal, intelligible language. If anyone could communicate with God in a prayer language or a private language, surely it would be Jesus! Nevertheless, Jesus prayed to his Father in normal, intelligible language.

In fact, Jesus warned against heaping up “empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words” (Matthew 6:7). Jesus warned against repetitious and unintelligible gibberish of pagan tongues-speaking, in which certain meaningless sounds were repeated over and over again.

Furthermore, when Jesus’ disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he gave them what we know as the Lord’s Prayer, which is a model of simplicity, clarity, and intelligibility.

Paul went on to say about the one who spoke in tongues in verse 2b: **“. . . for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.”** The **Spirit** to which Paul referred is not the Holy Spirit, but rather the speaker’s own spirit. This is the better

translation of the Greek word.

Paul was not advocating the spiritual gift of tongues in this verse, but simply noting the uselessness of counterfeit tongues. So, I would say that one should translate verse 2 as follows: “For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to a god; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in his spirit.”

Now, it is helpful to remember that Paul was writing to the Corinthians. Some were converted from Judaism; others were converted from paganism. The practice of ecstatic utterances was common in the paganism of Paul’s day, even in the city of Corinth. Devotees of a god would drink and dance themselves into frenzies until they went into semi-consciousness or even unconsciousness—an experience they considered to be the highest form of communion with the divine. They believed that in such drunkenness their spirits left their bodies and communed directly with the god or gods, a practice to which Paul alluded in Ephesians 5:18. The ecstatic speaking that often accompanied such experiences was thought to be the language of the gods.

The terms “to speak in a tongue” or “to speak in tongues” that Paul used so frequently in chapter 14 were commonly used in his day to describe pagan ecstatic speech.

In the church at Corinth much of the tongues-speaking had taken on the form and flavor of those pagan ecstasies. Emotionalism all but neutralized their rational senses, and selfish exhibitionism was common, with everyone wanting to do and say his own thing at the same time (14:26). Services were bedlam and chaos, with little worship and little edification taking place.<sup>3</sup>

Paul was speaking against this form of tongues.

The reason I say this, and this is extremely important to interpreting this passage correctly, is because of the way in which Paul used the word **tongue** in both the singular and plural form throughout chapter 14. Paul used the singular form for **tongue** in verses 2, 4, 13, 14, and 19 to indicate false tongues, the kind of

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<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 370-71.

tongues similar to pagan ecstatic speech. Paul used the plural form for **tongues** in verses 5, 6, 18, 22, 23, and 39 to indicate true tongues, the true spiritual gift from God. That may be why the translators of the King James Version supplied the word “unknown” before the singular form of **tongue**. The singular is used of false tongues because gibberish is singular; it cannot be “gibberishes.” There are no kinds of pagan ecstatic speech; there are, however, kinds of languages in the true gift, for which the plural **tongues** is used. The only exception is found in verse 27, where the singular form of **tongue** is used to refer to a single man speaking a single genuine language.

“So,” someone says, “I agree with you that one who speaks in a tongue does not build up the church. But what about verse 4a? Paul said in verse 4a: **‘The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself.’** Wouldn’t you agree that a tongue builds up the speaker?”

I agree with John MacArthur who says that Paul’s point here is sarcastic.<sup>4</sup> A true tongue is a language that is not understood by the speaker but it is understood by the hearer. It is a genuine language. That is why true tongues must be interpreted. And it can only build up when it is interpreted so that it can be understood. The whole point is that spiritual gifts are meant to build up the church. They were never intended for the personal benefit of the user.

So, if tongues does not build up the church, what does?

#### **IV. Prophecy Does Build Up the Church (14:3, 4b)**

Fourth, prophecy does build up the church.

Paul said in verse 3: **“On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.”** And he also said in verse 4b: **“... but the one who prophesies builds up the church.”**

Let me remind you of what I have said in a previous sermon about the spiritual gift of prophecy. Unlike tongues, miracles, and

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<sup>4</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 372.



healing (which were temporary, supernatural sign-gifts), the spiritual gift of prophecy is a permanent edifying gift. That is to say, the spiritual gift of prophecy is still at work in the church today.

Like its Hebrew equivalent (*naba*), the Greek verb (*propheteuo*) behind **prophecy** simply means “to speak forth, to proclaim.” It assumes the speaker is before an audience, and means “to speak publicly.” The connotation of prediction was added sometime in the Middle Ages.

Although many of the prophets made predictions, that was not their basic ministry and the idea is not involved in the original terms used to describe them and their work. The original terms, in fact, did not necessarily carry the idea of revelation. God revealed a great deal of his Word through the prophets, but much of their ministry was simply proclaiming, expounding, and exhorting with revelation already given. The biblical prophets sometimes revealed (see 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Peter 1:21) and sometimes only reiterated what had already been revealed.

A prophet of God, therefore, is simply one who speaks forth God’s Word, and **prophecy** is the proclaiming of that Word. The gift of prophecy is the Spirit-given and Spirit-empowered ability to proclaim God’s Word effectively. Since the completion of Scripture, prophecy has no longer been the means of new revelation, but has only proclaimed what has already been revealed in Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of prophecy, then, is for **upbuilding and encouragement and consolation**. The *New Living Translation* says that the “one who prophesies strengthens others, encourages them, and comforts them” (14:3). That is a beautiful picture of the purpose of the spiritual gift of prophecy.

Fundamentally, then, prophecy does build up the church.

So, what is Paul’s conclusion?

## V. Prophecy Is Greater Than Tongues (14:5)

Finally, prophecy is greater than tongues.

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<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 303.

Paul said in verse 5a: **“Now I want you all to speak in tongues.”**

The Greek word for **want** (*thelo*) means “to desire to have or experience something, to desire, to want, to wish.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, Paul was saying, “Now I wish you would all speak in tongues.”

Remember that the word for **tongues** here is plural. That means that this is true **tongues**, which is a genuine language. In the book of Acts, for example, these are the tongues that the Holy Spirit gave to the believers at Pentecost so that devout men from every nation under heaven heard them speak in his own language (Acts 2:1-13).

So, Paul wanted the Corinthians to be able to declare the good news of God in other known languages. However, he went on to say that even though he wanted them all to speak in tongues, he wanted them **“even more to prophesy”** (14:5b). That is, he wanted the church at Corinth to desire the preaching of God’s Word more than anything else.

Paul then said at the end of verse 5c: **“The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.”**

**Tongues** was always to be interpreted so that it could be understood. But prophecy was greater than tongues because by it the church of Jesus Christ is built up.

## Conclusion

The purpose of spiritual gifts is never for personal fulfillment, but always to build up the church and to present a godly witness to the world.

Shortly after I became a Christian at the age of nineteen, I was exposed to the charismatic movement. I understood them to say that one of the signs of being a Spirit-filled Christian was the ability to speak in tongues. And so for several years I prayed that

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<sup>6</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, elec. ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1996), 287.

God would enable me to speak in tongues. I never did.

However, I did grow in my understanding of God's Word. I have come to understand that God no longer gives the spiritual gift of tongues to believers today. As I said last week, tongues is one of the supernatural sign gifts and it is no longer needed today.

Furthermore, God's Word also indicates that tongues as a personal and private language was in fact pagan ecstatic speech. It was never operative as a spiritual gift, primarily because it completely opposed the purpose of spiritual gifts, which was to build up the church.

Now, someone may say that they have had the experience of speaking in tongues. How do I respond to that? We must always examine our experience in light of God's Word and never the other way around. We never examine God's Word in light of our experience. Our experience is never the ultimate standard of truth; God's Word is the ultimate standard of truth. So, we must always examine our experience—whatever experience that may be—in light of God's Word.

If tongues is an issue for you, I encourage you to attend worship for the next few Sundays. I will continue teaching on this subject and I hope we will all grow in our understanding of God's Word on this matter. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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**PRAYER:**

O God, thank you for your Word. We are so grateful that we can learn the truth in your Word. Help us to understand that our great desire as a church is to have the gift of prophecy active in our church. Please don't abandon us. Please give us capable teachers who will teach and preach your Word with clarity, conviction, and power.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go and use the spiritual gifts that God has given you for the common good!