

Eagerly Desire the Gift of Prophecy

1 Corinthians 14:1-40

Key Verse: 14:12

“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.”

In last week's message we learned what is true love. It is the love of God, love that is patient and kind. With this love in our hearts, we can use spiritual gifts properly. Then our Christian fellowship will be like the heavenly kingdom. Today's passage is about an unpopular and controversial issue: speaking in tongues in the church. This caused problems in Corinth. It still causes problems for us today. So we need to clarify how to use this gift of tongues. Furthermore, rather than speaking in tongues, we learn which spiritual gift we should desire. It is the gift of prophecy. Let's learn what the gift of prophecy means to us practically.

I. Edify the church (1-25)

Look at verse 1. "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy." Paul taught the way of love in chapter 13. Love is most important and the basis for using spiritual gifts. We must follow the way of love. Here, "follow" has the meaning of a hunter pursuing his prey. The hunter focuses his whole attention on the prey, hounding it with great zeal. Likewise, we must make every effort to learn and practice the love of God, whatever we do. Our lifestyle must be a lifestyle of love.

Also, we must eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. What is the gift of prophecy? The Hebrew word for prophet is "nabiy." It literally means spokesman. A prophet is God's spokesman. In the Old Testament a prophet delivered God's message to the people, and his word could become Scripture, such as the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. In the New Testament, the gift of prophecy is somewhat different. According to Hebrews 1:1, God no longer speaks to us primarily through prophets, but through his Son Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit makes Christ known to us (Jn 16:14). In this sense, one who has the gift of prophecy makes Christ known through the Scripture. To prophesy is to reveal who Christ is and what he does through the Scriptures. Some people think of prophecy as telling the future. This is part of it, but the emphasis is to reveal Christ through God's word. We can say that fruitful Bible teachers have the gift of prophecy.

Verse 1 teaches us that two things are most important in the life of the Christian church, and for each of its members: the love of God, and the word of God. We

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need both. If there is love without the word of God, there will be many spiritually sick people in the church. On the other hand, if there is the word of God without love, the church will be full of Pharisees. So Paul urges us to follow the way of love and to eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. Then our church can be healthy and fruitful. Verses 2-25 explain why we should eagerly desire the gift of prophecy, which is the word of God, rather than the gift of tongues.

First, tongues edify oneself, but prophecy edifies the church (2-5). One who speaks in tongues speaks to God from his spirit in a language that others cannot understand (2). This gift is for building up one's personal relationship with God. However, those who prophesy share the word of God with men, in the language that they understand, for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort (3). "He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church" (4). So Paul encouraged them to prophesy in the church so that the whole church could be built up (5).

In order to understand this passage better, we should clarify what it means to speak in tongues. This is first mentioned in Acts 2. After Jesus ascended into heaven, 120 disciples gathered together and prayed constantly until they were united in the love of God. Then, according to Jesus' promise, the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost in the form of a strong wind and tongues of fire. The apostles began to speak in tongues. People from all over the world gathered around them, and each one heard the wonders of God in their own native language. These tongues were intelligible to men. In Acts 10, Peter preached the gospel in Cornelius' house. Those who accepted the message received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues and praise God. In Acts 19, Paul laid his hands on some disciples and prayed for them. Then the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. Speaking in tongues is one sign of the Holy Spirit. However, when the word "tongues" is used in these passages in Acts, it can also be understood as "languages," according to the footnotes. These are the only recorded cases of speaking in tongues in the book of Acts. Some people claim that one who receives the Holy Spirit will speak in tongues and that one who does not speak in tongues has not received the Holy Spirit. That is not true. Tongues do not represent all gifts of the Holy Spirit. Many in the New Testament who received the Holy Spirit did not speak in tongues. As we studied in 12:3, one who confesses "Jesus is Lord" has the Holy Spirit.

The book of Acts is called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. When we review the book of Acts, we find that the Holy Spirit works through the word of God (Ac 2:37-39;

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4:31; 11:1). Acts 6:7a says, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly...." Acts 12:24 says, "But the word of God continued to increase and spread." In Ephesus, Paul devoted himself for two years to teaching the word of God daily in the lecture hall at Tyrannus. Then all the people in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Ac 19:10). Many who had practiced sorcery repented and burned their scrolls in a fire. A great miracle happened. Acts 19:20 says, "In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power." When Paul preached the word of God, people were changed. Lives were transformed. Broken families were healed and reunited. Society was reshaped. Where there is the word of God, there is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is like a needle and thread. Where one is working, the other is working as well.

Those who have received the Holy Spirit are related to the word of God. In UBF we study the word of God, share the word of God and pray based on one word of God. The Holy Spirit works through the word to transform lives and change us into new creations. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. We see many people around us who have been changed by the work of the Holy Spirit through Bible study, including Steve Stasinos, and me, and Dr. Alan Wolff. The Corinthian believers highly valued the gift of tongues as though it was everything. Paul wanted them to realize that speaking in tongues was good for their personal growth in the love of God. But speaking in tongues publicly can cause problems. So Paul did not encourage them to speak in tongues. He also did not forbid them from speaking in tongues. Then what could they do? They could use their gift to have a deep relationship with God through prayer, very personally in their own private room. They should not become proud and critical toward others, but use their gift to develop their personal relationship with God. On the other hand, in the church Paul urged the Corinthians to prophesy because this strengthens, encourages, comforts, and builds up the church. Therefore, Bible teachers should have confidence that they have the gift of prophesy and use it fervently, because this is the great work of the Holy Spirit.

Second, people understand prophecy, but not tongues (6-19). Look at verse 6. "Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?" This verse details some aspects of the gift of prophecy, which is the word of God. This gift is useful to the church because it communicates intelligibly and brings about transformation and spiritual growth. However, if Paul taught in a language that they did not understand, it would be ineffective. If we go to another country, where English is not known, and speak in English, we will fail in evangelism. No matter how well we prepare the message or Bible study, it will be

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useless. That is why UBF missionaries try to learn the native language in their mission field. When Mother Barry went to Korea, she had to learn Korean to share the gospel meaningfully. There was a great work of God in Corinth because Paul shared the word of God in the language that the people could understand.

In verses 7-8, Paul uses the examples of musical instruments. A harp or a flute can make a beautiful sound. But to do this, the artist must practice hard and play properly, like our orchestra members. Otherwise the instruments do not make a beautiful sound, but an irritating sound. Trumpets are useful to convey messages to soldiers in the army, such as "charge," "retreat," "wake up," and so forth. But to do so the specific tunes must be played clearly. Otherwise soldiers will be confused and make many mistakes. In verses 9-12, Paul uses the example of language. All sorts of languages have meaning. But if we do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, we become foreigners. So we must speak intelligible words to communicate with others. Otherwise there is no connection and we become like one beating the air. So when we share a message or teach the Bible we must know how to communicate with church members. We must use proper and appropriate language. Tony King has an MBA from Northwestern. Yet he was chosen to deliver a message for middle school children (MBF) at Purdue. He wrote an excellent message, full of joy and humor. However, when MBF leaders heard it, it seemed too complex and lengthy. So Tony revised his message. To share God's word effectively we must use language that others understand.

In verses 13-19, Paul talks about why we should pray or sing in the church with our spirit and also with our mind. If we pray or sing only with our spirit, people cannot understand (14). There is no response. No one can say "Amen." Someone may speak in tongues most dramatically, but no one understands (16). But when we use both our spirit and mind, then people may understand what we are praying and singing and respond with "Amen!" In this way we can edify the church. Paul could speak in tongues more than all of them. But what did he say? Let's read verse 19. "But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue." Here we learn that in the church, we have to speak intelligible words that others understand in order to edify the church.

Third, tongues drive unbelievers away; prophecy draws them to God (20-25). Look at verse 20. "Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults." A child's thinking is self-centered, while an adult's thinking embraces others. An adult has wisdom, the ability to know what is right and what is wrong. In the church we need wisdom to know what is edifying to others, and what is not. Wise people know what to say, and what not to say, in the

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church. Wise people know how to speak in a way that strengthens, encourages and comforts others. But self-centered people easily hurt others and destroy their faith because they insist on their own ideas without any regard for others. Those who speak in tongues in the church can fall into this trap. So we must give our hearts to prophecy, the word of God, in the church, and be adults.

In verses 21-22, Paul tells us that tongues are a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers. Prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. When his people gather together in church, God wants to speak to them in meaningful ways. God wants to reveal himself and his will to them so his children can find direction and be blessed. So we should seek the gift of prophecy rather than speaking in tongues.

In verses 23-25 Paul gives us two scenarios that reveal the importance of prophecy in regards to unbelievers. If unbelievers come into a worship service in which everyone is speaking a different language at the same time, with no one understanding anyone else, they will conclude that Christians are crazy. Unbelievers do not come to church for entertainment. They come to church with heavy burdens of sin and hard life problems. Their souls are longing for the word of God. They come because they are weary and tired and they seek real rest. They have wandered without knowing the meaning of existence or their life destination and come to church to find meaning and direction. They need comfort and true hope. They need the message of the forgiveness of sins. In a word, they need the gospel. If all they find is people speaking in tongues they will not understand what is happening and will go out of the door of the church never to return. On the other hand, if they hear the words of prophecy, the message of the gospel, they can repent of their hidden sins and restore their love relationship with God. We have seen this happen time and again during our UBF conferences. When the word of God is preached with power, people can repent and turn to God. I pray that in the coming Purdue Conference many people may hear the word of God, repent of their sins, and turn to God. Where there is the word of God, there is the work of the Holy Spirit. People are saved from their sins and become new creations in Christ. But without the word of God, no one can solve their sin problem. So the word of God is very important. That is why we must eagerly desire the gift of prophecy, the word of God.

II. Worship in an orderly way (26-40)

When we read verses 26-40 we feel awkward and that some verses are very controversial. But we have to understand this passage in the context of the

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Corinthian church. Look at verse 26. "What then shall we say, brothers? 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." The Corinthians had a program suited for their context. Each nation is different, and each must discover their own appropriate worship program. At the time there were hymns, words of instruction, revelation, tongues and interpretation. The Bible had not been completed. So they needed revelation. Now that we have the Bible, we do not need revelation. In fact, anyone who claims to receive direct revelation from God is a false prophet.

In verses 27-28 Paul explains that if they speak in tongues they need an interpreter to edify the church. In verses 29-32 Paul explains how prophecy can edify the church. The point is that all of this must be done for the strengthening of the church (26b). The church must be orderly and peaceful. Look at verse 33. "For God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace as in all the congregations of the saints." God is pleased by worship that is orderly and peaceful in nature.

Verses 34-35 teach that women should remain silent in the church. We should not take this literally. We have to understand this in the context of the Corinthian church. At that time, women's social position was very low. They did not even count in the census. That is why Paul did not allow them to speak publicly. But these days it is quite different. Women are more powerful than men. So women, please teach the Bible very diligently and bear much spiritual fruit for the glory of God. We pray that all UBF women may follow the example of Mother Barry in using the gift of prophecy.

In verses 36-38 Paul declares that they should accept his words as the Lord's command. If one ignores this, he will be ignored. Look at verses 39-40 Paul concluded that they should be eager to prophesy, but not forbid speaking in tongues. Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

In today's passage we learn that we need two things to be healthy Christians and have a healthy church. First we must follow the way of love. Second we must eagerly desire the gift of prophecy, which is the word of God. Love and the word of God are essential in our Christian life, and in our Christian fellowship. When we have the love of God and the word of God we can grow spiritually and build up the church.