

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Life in the Spirit #10

Sermon Summary #10

The Power and Pitfalls of Prophecy 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

There was a time in the history of the so-called charismatic movement when the most controversial and divisive topic was that of speaking in tongues. Not anymore. That's not to say everyone agrees on the subject of tongues. Far from it. But the most volatile issue today, and probably for the past 30 or so years, is **the spiritual gift of prophecy**. So what is the spiritual gift of prophecy?

When I use the word *prophecy* I'm not referring primarily to the prediction of future events. A simple definition would be that ***prophecy is the human report of a divine revelation*** (adapted from Wayne Grudem). Prophecy is the speaking forth in merely human words something God has spontaneously brought to mind.

I can almost hear someone say, "But Sam, if this spiritual gift is so controversial and divisive, why don't we ignore it and move on to something more helpful, something that won't threaten people or make them feel uncomfortable?" That's a good question. And I've got an even better answer. It's found here in 1 Corinthians 14:1 –

“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.”

I imagine quite a few of you are debating whether or not to make the pursuit of the spiritual gift of prophecy a priority in your life. And I am here today to tell you that ***you don't have a choice!*** "Earnestly desire spiritual gifts," *commanded* the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:1, "especially that you may prophesy." Paul didn't simply say that we ought to *think* about desiring to prophesy or that we should put it on our list of *possible* issues to discuss. He *commanded* us to earnestly desire to prophesy!

In other words, this is an **exhortation**, an **imperative**, a **command**, not merely a statement of fact. In 1 Corinthians 12:31 Paul says, "earnestly desire" the higher gifts. The verb translated "earnestly (or eagerly) desire" (*zeloute*) is grammatically ambiguous (it can be either indicative [a statement of fact] or imperative [a command]). A few insist it is merely a statement characterizing the behavior of the Corinthians, hence "*you are eager* for the higher gifts." In other words, they take it to be a statement of fact concerning a state of affairs, not an exhortation to future action.

But the Corinthians were *not*, in fact, seeking the greater/higher gifts. That was precisely their problem. They were placing far more emphasis on the gift of tongues, making it a mark of spirituality. In fact, the whole of chapter 14 is Paul's attempt to encourage them to seek prophecy rather than uninterpreted tongues precisely because it is the greater gift insofar as it edifies others.

Also, the same verb form appears here in 1 Corinthians 14:1 and again in 14:39 and is in both texts unambiguously imperative (i.e., a command). It is difficult to believe that the same verb, in the same form, in the same context, would be used by Paul in two entirely different ways without some hint or contextual clue to that effect.

Consider also 14:12 where Paul writes, "So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts [referring to their collective enthusiasm for tongues], **seek** [imperative] to abound for the edification of the church [in particular, the gift of prophecy, as the context demands]."

I've often been asked, "What should be done when people begin to grow in their zeal for spiritual gifts like prophecy? What should be said when people are increasingly hungry for the manifestation of the Spirit's power? What should our response be when Christians display a persistent and intense desire for the

supernatural work of the Spirit in their lives and in the life of the church?” If you listen closely, you will detect behind that question a measure of *fear*. There is concern that people who yearn for the ministry and power of the Spirit are turning soft on doctrine or may be inclined to neglect spiritual disciplines, or perhaps they long for the miraculous as an excuse for ignoring Bible study and evangelism and prayer.

How do you think the apostle Paul would respond to such a question, especially if the people who have this desire for spiritual gifts have already shown themselves to be somewhat immature? I want us to think about this in the light of what Paul said to the Christians in Corinth. To a body of believers given to excess and immaturity, Paul said: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.”

To those who are eagerly hungry and zealous for the power of the Holy Spirit and his gifts, especially prophecy, Paul says: “Good! God bless you! Go for it!”

In addition to the command in 1 Corinthians 14:1, we read in v. 5 that Paul wants all “to prophesy”. In 14:12 he acknowledges that the Corinthians “are eager for manifestations of the Spirit” and encourages them to strive to excel in building up the church. The argument of chapter 14 would indicate that this is his way of encouraging the pursuit of prophecy, given its capacity to edify others in the body (14:3,4,5). Again in 14:12 and 14:39 Paul explicitly commands the Corinthians to desire and pursue the gift of prophecy.

The verb translated “earnestly desire” (ESV) means to have a strong affection for, to ardently yearn, to zealously long for. Or to use modern lingo, “I want you to want it really bad!” So, do you? **This is not an option!** This is **not an issue of personality**, as if some are more inclined than others to experience this kind of spiritual phenomenon. This is not an issue of “**It’s for that church but not this one**.” After all, we’ve got our mission statement and they’ve got theirs. If that’s what God is calling them to pursue, fine, but we have a different divine mandate.”

You cannot respond to Paul’s words in this passage by saying: “Thanks God, but no thanks. I appreciate the opportunity you’ve offered me, but *it’s just not my thing*, if you know what I mean.” God, through Paul, says: “Yes I know what you mean. And I’m telling you to *make it your thing!* Or would you prefer to sin by disobeying a direct order?”

All churches, no matter how different they may be, have an identical mandate when it comes to obeying Scripture. No one is exempt or special or unique in such a way that they can justify disobedience to God’s Word. This is not a suggestion or mere advice or wise counsel. This is a divine command, a mandate from God himself. If you and I are not earnestly desiring spiritual gifts, especially prophecy, we are disobedient.

This is not an issue for prayer. You do not respond to this passage by saying, “Well, ok, I’ll pray about it.” No. ***You don’t pray about whether or not you are going to obey God. God is not giving us a choice. He’s giving us a command.*** The only choice you have is whether or not you are going to obey.

Can you imagine the reaction if we responded to other commands in Scripture the way many respond to 1 Corinthians 14:1? “I don’t feel led to flee fornication. I think that’s meant for other Christians but I don’t sense that’s my calling.” Or “The prohibition against adultery just isn’t compatible with where I am in God right now,” or “Being a generous giver to the needy is a wonderful calling for some churches, but we’re just not into that sort of thing at this stage of our growth as a church.”

Therefore, it is not enough to be *open* to spiritual gifts and their operation in the local church. One must be *zealous* for them and *earnestly desire* their presence, especially the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1, 12, 26).

Having said that, I confess that I’m somewhat confused by Paul’s advice. I could understand this exhortation if it were given to a church with undeniable maturity, a church like that in Thessalonica or Philippi or Ephesus. *To a church with great character and in need of power, this exhortation makes sense. But Corinth was a church with great power and little character!*

This counsel of Paul's strikes us as odd, unwise, if not downright dangerous. To the very people guilty of abusing spiritual gifts, Paul says be eager for more! Is he not simply pouring gasoline on a raging fire? If a man is drowning you don't throw him a life jacket filled with lead. You don't say to a struggling alcoholic, "Hey buddy, have a drink!"

What this reveals is that *suppression of spiritual zeal is never the answer. Too much power is never the problem, but too little maturity is.* I know of no place in Scripture where the absence of spiritual power is portrayed as a good thing. Observe what Paul does **not** say: "Settle down Corinthians. Cool it! Put on the brakes! Ease up on this supernatural stuff. Forget about spiritual gifts. Don't you realize that spiritual gifts are what got you into trouble in the first place?"

The reason he doesn't say that is because **spiritual gifts were not the cause** of their troubles: **immaturity** and **carnality** were. Let us never forget that spiritual gifts were God's idea. He thought them up. He gave them to the church. They are his ordained means for edifying the body and consoling the weak and encouraging those in despair. Spiritual gifts were formed and shaped by God. They operate in his power (1 Corinthians 12:6b) and manifest his Spirit (12:7). If spiritual gifts, per se, are the problem, then there's no one to blame but God. If spiritual gifts had been responsible for the fanaticism, elitism, and overall chaotic atmosphere in the church, Paul would hardly have encouraged them to earnestly desire even more that such gifts be manifest in their midst.

Some have pointed out, correctly, that the exhortation to "earnestly desire" spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1) is in the *plural*. But they conclude from this, incorrectly, that Paul's command is therefore directed not to individual believers but to the corporate church. They argue that this is grounds for rejecting the idea that individual Christians should seek any spiritual gift.

But of course the verb is plural, as are virtually all Paul's commands in letters other than those addressed to individuals (such as Philemon, Titus, and Timothy). Paul is writing to *everyone* in the church at Corinth, each of whom is responsible for individually responding to an exhortation that has validity for the entire church. In other words, what is the corporate church if not a collection of *individuals* on *each* of whom the obligation falls? The plural of this exhortation simply indicates that *all* believers in Corinth are to heed the apostolic admonition. It is a duty *common* to everyone. That includes us as well.

I can well imagine someone in Corinth (or today) responding to this attempt to evade Paul's obvious intent by saying: "How can we as a church pursue spiritual gifts if none of us as individuals is allowed to?"

A Brief Overview

This brings us to the remainder of 1 Corinthians 14 and a principle that we must get straight in our heads and hearts: *the solution to the abuse of spiritual gifts is not disuse, but proper use.* Nowhere in this chapter does Paul recommend that the Corinthians abandon spiritual gifts or de-emphasize spiritual power. He simply gives them guidelines on how these powerful manifestations of the Spirit are to be properly exercised in the body of Christ to the edification of God's people.

So what I propose to do in the time remaining is provide you with something of an overview of 1 Corinthians 14 and what Paul says about the gift of prophecy and how it should be exercised in the local church. I'm going to do this by asking and then answering *seven* questions.

(1) Can anyone prophesy? Yes, but that doesn't mean everyone should expect to function consistently as a Prophet in the church. Paul wishes that "all" would prophesy (1 Cor. 14:5), but does that mean he *expects* them to? His desire for people to prophesy comes from his recognition that "the one who prophesies builds up (edifies) the church" (1 Cor. 14:4). In two other texts he seems to envision the possibility that any Christian might speak prophetically (1 Cor. 14:24,31). But again this *doesn't* mean that everyone *will*. Paul is probably drawing a distinction between, on the one hand, "prophets" who consistently display a facility and accuracy in this gift and, on the other, those who merely on occasion "prophesy". Thus not all will be "prophets" (cf. Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:29), but it would appear that all *may* prophesy.

Also, when I say that potentially anyone can prophesy, the Scriptures are clear that *both men and women* are included (Acts 2:17-18; 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:2-16). There is nothing to indicate that only men were allowed to prophesy.

(2) When Paul exhorts the Corinthians to especially desire prophecy, is he denouncing or denigrating the gift of tongues as unimportant and ineffective in local church life? No. It was the apostle himself who says, "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you" (v. 18; cf. v. 5). What he is contrasting in vv. 1-5 isn't prophecy and tongues, but prophecy and *uninterpreted* tongues in the *corporate* meeting of the church. Prophecy is "greater" (v. 5) than uninterpreted tongues because it serves to "build up" the church. You can only be built up or edified and instructed by something you can understand. Uninterpreted tongues speech is unintelligible (v. 2). That doesn't mean it is bad. In fact, Paul strongly encourages praying in tongues in ones private devotions (as we'll see later on). As he makes clear in v. 5, if there is interpretation of tongues speech, this gift can function in the same way prophecy does to build up other believers.

(3) Where does prophecy come from? All prophecy is based on a *revelation*. In 1 Cor. 14:30 Paul writes, "if a *revelation* is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent" (lit., "if to another who is sitting *it is revealed*"). In 13:2 Paul seems to suggest that the basis on which prophecies are made is the reception of divine "mysteries". The verb "to reveal" (*apokalupto*) occurs 26x in the NT and the noun "revelation" occurs 18x. In every instance the reference is to divine activity; never to human communication.

Unfortunately, whenever one uses the word "revelation" or the verb "to reveal" some people start getting nervous. Whenever they hear that word they think of the Bible. Anything God "reveals" must be included in Scripture, or so they think.

But clearly they fail to recognize different ways or senses in which God might "reveal" something to us. In Philippians 3:15 he tells the church that "if in anything you think otherwise, God will *reveal* that also to you." And in Ephesians 1:17 Paul prays that a "spirit of wisdom and *revelation*" would be granted to believers. We see two other similar uses of the verb or noun form of "reveal/revelation" in Matthew 11:27 and Romans 1:18. The point is simply that not all "revelatory" activity of God comes to us as Scripture quality, divinely authoritative, canonical truth.

Prophecy, therefore, is not based on a hunch, a supposition, an inference, an educated guess, or even on sanctified wisdom. Prophecy is not based on personal insight, intuition, or illumination. Prophecy is the human *report* of a divine *revelation*. This is what distinguishes prophecy from teaching. Teaching is always based on a text of Scripture. Prophecy is always based on a spontaneous revelation.

Thus, contrary to what some have suggested, the gift of prophecy is *not* the equivalent of preaching. Preaching/teaching is grounded in an inspired text. *Prophecy is the fruit of a spontaneous revelation*. If prophecy and teaching/preaching were one and the same, there would be no reason for Paul to differentiate between the two in Ephesians 4:11. People may "learn" (1 Cor. 14:31) from prophecy no less than from preaching, but the fact that the *results* of each may be identical does *not* mean the *roots* are. Indeed, in 1 Cor. 14:26 Paul again distinguishes between coming to a corporate meeting with a "teaching" or "lesson" (Gk., *didache*) and coming with a "revelation" (Gk., *apokalupsis*).

(4) What kind of information does God reveal in prophecy? Or again, what is the *content* of the sort of revelation that results in prophecy? In 1 Corinthians 14:25 Paul speaks of God disclosing the "secrets" of the heart. On numerous occasions I've witnessed this phenomenon. Men and women who believed their thoughts, their fantasies, their sins, and their plans for the future were secretly hidden, even from God, are shocked by the revelatory activity of the Spirit. Paul describes only one of any number of responses to the prophetic gift: "falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (v. 25).

But there is any number of other things God might choose to reveal through this gift. It may be a warning (Acts 21:4,10-14), a Scripture passage that applies especially at this moment in time to a person's life, a word of exhortation, an invitation to some ministry opportunity, guidance for decision making (Acts 13:1-3), etc. It may be a revelation of some illness of which God intends to heal you (Acts 14:9-10). It may even

be that a prophetic word concerns some spiritual gift that God intends to impart to a person. This is evidently what happened in the case of Timothy, Paul's spiritual son (see 1 Tim. 4:14).

(5) How can God, who is infallible, reveal something that is fallible? The answer is simple: He can't. He doesn't. The principle here is this: **every prophecy has three elements**, only one of which is assuredly of God. First, there is the *revelation* itself, the divine act of disclosure to a human recipient. The second element is the *interpretation* of what has been disclosed, or the attempt to ascertain its meaning. Third, there is the *application* of that interpretation. God is alone responsible for the revelation. Whatever he discloses to the human mind is wholly free from error. It is as infallible as God is. It is true in all its parts, completely devoid of falsehood. Indeed, the revelation, which is the root of every genuine prophetic utterance, is as inerrant and infallible as the written Word of God itself (the Bible). In terms of the *revelation* alone, the NT prophetic gift does not differ from the OT prophetic gift.

The problem is that you might misinterpret or misapply what God has disclosed. The fact that God has *spoken* perfectly doesn't mean that you have *heard* perfectly. A person *may* interpret and apply, without error, what God has revealed. But the mere existence of a divine revelation does not in itself guarantee that the interpretation or application of God's revealed truth will share in its perfection.

This is especially troubling to some and has led them to conclude that NT prophecy is of no benefit to the church. After all, how can a gift that is potentially fallible be a blessing to anyone? A comparison of prophecy with the gift of teaching should help us answer the question.

Most of you will occasionally disagree with me when it comes to the interpretation of a biblical text. Notwithstanding the presence of the objective, written *revelation* of God, you may walk away from a sermon or Bible study with conflicting views and differing applications of its relevance for your life. We might wish that God had promised to guarantee that our interpretation and subsequent communication of his revealed Word would always be accurate. But he hasn't.

What should you do? Should you denounce teaching and insist that a gift so obviously susceptible to error and abuse be banned from church life? Of course not. You realize that only the Bible has intrinsic divine authority. What I say when I teach has authority only in a secondary, derivative sense. Simply because someone may have come up short in his interpretive skills is no reason to repudiate the spiritual gift of teaching.

Like teaching, prophecy is also based on a revelation from God. In some way beyond ordinary sense perception, God *reveals* something to the mind of the prophet not found in Scripture (but never contrary to it). The revelation, having come from God, is true. It is error free. Like the Bible, it alone has intrinsic divine authority. But the gift of prophecy does not guarantee the infallible *transmission* of that revelation. The believer may *perceive or understand* the revelation imperfectly, and consequently she may *communicate* it imperfectly.

The gift of prophecy may result in *fallible* prophecy just like the gift of teaching may result in *fallible* teaching. Therefore, if teaching (a gift prone to fallibility) can edify and build up the church, why can't prophecy be good for edification as well (see 1 Cor. 14:3,12,26), even though both gifts suffer from human imperfection and stand in need of testing?

(6) What is the purpose of prophetic utterances? Paul says prophecy *builds up, encourages, and consoles* (1 Cor. 14:3). When people are suddenly confronted with the inescapable reality that God truly knows their hearts and has heard their prayers and is intimately acquainted with all their ways, they are encouraged to press on and to persevere. I've often spoken with believers who, in spite of what they knew theologically to be true, *felt* as if God had forgotten them. Their prayers seemed never to be heard, much less answered. Then, often quite without warning, they receive a prophetic word from a total stranger that could be known only by God himself, and their faith is bolstered and their spirit consoled.

Do you need edification, encouragement, and consolation? Who doesn't? That's what prophecy was designed by God to accomplish. No wonder Paul commands us to earnestly desire that we might prophesy.

Not to dazzle people. Not for sensationalism. Not to draw attention to ourselves, and certainly not merely or even primarily to lay the foundation of the early church, but to display the love of God for his people, to confirm his presence and power in our lives, and to show his providential care.

(7) How does prophecy function on Sunday mornings, in the corporate assembly of Bridgeway Church?

The first thing to know about our approach to prophecy is our belief that the ideal and preferred context for the exercise of this gift is our house churches. We strongly encourage house church leaders to provide instruction on the nature and function of prophecy and to make each gathering a safe and encouraging place for the exercise of this spiritual gift.

We also believe that opportunity should exist for the use of this spiritual gift in our corporate celebrations. However, because of the size of our gatherings and the time limitations we regularly face, the following guidelines will be observed.

First, at each celebration there will be ***a designated point person*** who has the responsibility and authority to make the final decision on how prophetic ministry is to be facilitated. This will usually be one of our Senior Leaders, one of the Elders, or a member of the Prophetic Council.

Second, if you believe the Lord has revealed something to you, you should ***share this with the appointed individual***. We prefer that you put it in writing, but if that is not possible simply go to them and communicate what you believe the Lord is saying.

Third, this person will make an immediate judgment as to ***whether you have indeed heard from God***. Please understand that they are not infallible in this judgment and errors can be made. We ask that you not be offended or take it as a personal rejection if they determine that you have not heard from the Lord.

Fourth, if it is determined that the Lord has truly spoken to you, their first task will be to decide whether or not the revelation is for you ***personally*** or is designed for the church ***corporately***. Often times what you hear from God is intended for your personal edification or should become a focus of your own personal prayer life. If it is determined that your word is suitable for the whole body, several other decisions have to be made.

Fifth, at this time a judgment will be made as to ***when*** the word should be shared with the entire body. That is to say, should it be shared now or perhaps next week (or sometime thereafter), once additional time is given to prayer and discussion among the staff, Elders, and Prophetic Council?

Sixth, assuming that the word is appropriate for the entire church at the time you received it, a judgment will be made as to ***the most fitting time during the service***. Should it be shared immediately or should we wait until after worship, or perhaps after the sermon?

Seventh, once it is decided when the word is to be shared, the final decision concerns ***who*** should speak it forth. On occasion we will permit the individual who received the word to share it publicly. This will often depend on how well we know the person and if they have a demonstrated history of accuracy and maturity in the exercise of their spiritual gift. At other times, the point person will assume responsibility for communicating the word to the body as a whole.

Eighth, every believer in the congregation has a personal responsibility to pay close attention to the prophetic word and to ***judge or evaluate*** the biblical validity of its content (cf. 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thess. 5:19-22). However, only men are permitted to articulate publicly this evaluation or judgment in the corporate gathering (1 Cor. 14:33-35).

Finally, the Scriptures are clear that, at most, ***“two or three prophets”*** should speak during the course of any one corporate gathering (1 Cor. 14:29). We ask that everyone abide by this rule.

Conclusion . . .