

The Future of Your Body *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*

The Gift of Prophecy: Words of Hope from Your Mouth *Selections from 1 Corinthians 12 – 14*

Introduction: The Possibilities and the Risks of the Prophetic Gift

This morning we're venturing into a new section in 1 Corinthians focusing on the dynamic life of the body of Christ. First Corinthians 12 – 14 is about spiritual gifts, and we're going to focus on the gift of prophecy. Let me give you an illustration of the possibilities of the prophetic gift. One of my mentors in life was my college pastor, Dorman. Dorman was and is one of the best teachers of Scripture I have ever met. His love for his wife and his five children was inspiring to me. But what was most inspiring to me was his desire to follow the living Lord Jesus by his Spirit. His prayer every morning, 'Lord Jesus, please live your life out through me,' has become my morning prayer. He once told me a story of when he was a student at Stanford. At the end of September, Dorman ran into a friend that he hadn't seen since the start of school. Stanford is a big campus, so that's very possible. This friend shared about what he was going through. And Dorman listened with one ear to the Spirit of Jesus, asking, 'Lord, what would you like to say through me?' Dorman gave this friend a timely word of encouragement, and this friend said, 'Wow, thanks.' Another month passed and Dorman ran into this friend at the end of October. This time, the friend was in a relational situation with a young woman. Dorman, once again listening with one ear to the Lord, felt like he heard the Lord give a word of caution to this friend. So Dorman said that word, and this friend said, 'Wow, thanks.' He left with a lot to think about. Then after another month, Dorman and this friend bumped into each other again. When they were about twenty feet away from each other, the friend saw Dorman. He threw up his arms, yelled, 'Ahhhh!' And he turned around and ran. He was only half joking. He came back and said, 'Every time I run into you, I feel like God has something to say to me.'

Relevance

Ever since I met Dorman, my relationship with Jesus has been a lot more dynamic, more unexpected, and more surprising. That is an example of how Jesus can speak through us by his Spirit, if we cultivate the gift of prophecy. Prophecy in the Old Testament and the New is speaking forth a word from God. It is not necessarily telling the future, although it could be that. It is not necessarily foretelling. It is forthtelling. We'll look at how Paul describes prophecy in this section.

The material we're looking at is in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The reason we're looking at this book is that Paul teaches us how to think about our body. Because Jesus was raised bodily from the grave, our bodies also matter to God, and God will raise us bodily from the grave as well. If our bodies matter, then everything we do with our bodies matter. Sexual ethics matter. It's rooted in Jesus' resurrection body. Since Jesus gives his body to all for their salvation, we also give our bodies to his mission. Mission and the discipline of our body is rooted in Jesus' resurrection body. How we treat other people's bodies matters. So Christian social justice matters. It's also rooted in Jesus' resurrection body. Then our corporate body matters because Jesus has only one body. We too must be one body in the sense of reconciliation, forgiveness, respect, and love. This is why we are one with every other church that today or any other day calls upon Jesus as Lord. Here we are looking at the spiritual gifts in the body, because spiritual gifts are how the body acts and speaks as a body.

Let me set your expectations for this time. This is only a survey of 1 Corinthians when it comes to prophecy. It is not a survey of all of Scripture (I wish I could do such a thing). Nor is this a time of impartation or workshopping. This is also not a time to survey why some Christian traditions believe that prophecy does not continue, or how to debate that, although I think it's important to know those things. I also want us to notice all throughout this letter that nowhere does Paul say how we *receive* a prophecy from God. Does it come in the form of a vision or picture in our mind, like with Isaiah or Zechariah? Are there words that a person hears in their mind, like Abraham or Jeremiah? Does God use Scripture, like he did with Daniel, or the virgin Mary, or the elderly Simeon? Can God speak through dreams, like with Joseph or Pharaoh? Is it a nudge in the heart? It seems like the answer is yes to all those things, and that there is more to explore. Paul is less interested in how a person first *receives* a prophecy, and more interested in how he or she *delivers* it.

This God Speaks Through Us

Prophecy is rooted in the fact that God is not mute. He is a God who speaks. Paul writes in his introduction, ^{1:4} 'I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in everything you were enriched in Him, *in all speech* and all knowledge, ⁶ even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, ⁷ *so that you are not lacking in any gift*, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.' And then in 12:1 – 2, he compares belief in Jesus to worship of mute idols: ^{12:1} 'Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. ² You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the *mute idols*, however you were led.' Notice how he doesn't just say idols, like he usually does, but mute idols. We serve a God who speaks. He spoke life into existence. He spoke His blessing upon humanity. He spoke His commandments to us. He spoke His promises. And now He still speaks to us. He speaks through us by His Spirit. That is an amazing privilege.

The Spirit Makes Known that Jesus is Lord

The next point is that all the gifts point to one reality: Jesus is Lord. The Spirit opens up a window of insight and experience of that one reality. Look at 12:3 – 11: ^{12:3} 'Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus is accursed'; and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. ⁶ There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. ⁷ But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills...[we are one body with various gifts]'

The Holy Spirit more than anything wants to express the Lordship of Jesus. So if someone has some interesting ability, but is not able to say Jesus is lord, then that ability is not a gift of the Holy Spirit. For example, Azibe says that he has seen and can see dead people, as in their spirits. I don't understand that ability. It doesn't even fit with my current understanding of what happens to people's souls when they die – I think they 'sleep.' So what is Azibe seeing? I don't know. But because that ability was not tied to him being a Christian and saying, 'Jesus is Lord,' I hesitate to call it the gift of discernment from the Holy Spirit. Or, Hindus at Tufts have reported to us that they have gone to their gurus and gotten healed. Muslims also claim that healings happen in their mosques. I don't know exactly what happened there. I have my theories, like perhaps the Holy Spirit works as he chooses, but in any case, I don't think this was someone who has the gift of healing from the Holy Spirit. It seems to be some other supernatural influence, and people can have some other connection with the supernatural, but it is not connected with the words, 'Jesus is Lord,' so it is not a gift from the Spirit of Jesus.

The gifts of the Spirit are gifts that Jesus gives because he's the king. Instead of receiving gifts, like human kings do, he gives gifts. The same thought is present in Ephesians 4:7 – 13 when Paul says that Jesus ascended on high, led captivity captive, and gave gifts back. Those gifts are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers, and so on. The key here is not whether something supernatural happens. Supernatural things happen all the time. The key is that the supernatural thing glorifies *Jesus*, focuses on *him*, declares *him* as Lord, and draws our attention to *him*.

Prophecy is the Highest Gift Available to All

Paul then gives us an incomplete list of gifts in 12:28. ^{12:28} 'And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues...' We know this list is incomplete because Ephesians 4 and Romans 12 have other spiritual gifts listed. No list in the New Testament is complete. And it may be that there are more gifts than what Ephesians 4, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 – 14, and 1 Peter 4 identifies. But one thing is consistent: prophecy is the highest gift available to us. We know this because of 12:31 and 14:1, ^{12:31} 'But earnestly desire the greater gifts....' ^{14:1} 'Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.'

Why not the gift of apostle? Apostles were a select, limited group of people specifically chosen by Jesus to be eyewitnesses of him, especially of his physical, resurrected body. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that he was the last of the apostles (15:8). ³ 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, [and listen to the following, because it's an early creed – biblical scholars agree that Paul is quoting something he inherited] that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day

according to the Scriptures,⁵ and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep;⁷ then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;⁸ and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.’

Paul was the last of all. There were no more. There are no more. There will be no more. Paul is sure of that because the highest gift that he says the Corinthians could aspire to have is the gift of prophecy, not the gift of apostleship. Not only that, the Corinthians had all kinds of spiritual and supernatural experiences, but Paul does not encourage them to expect a special resurrection appearance of Jesus, nor do they seem to expect any such thing. The very experience that makes an apostle an apostle is no longer open for us to have.

Now I know that flies in the face of how different Christians today use the title ‘apostle.’ Today, we use that word to mean a bunch of different things. Does it mean ‘leader of a house church network’? Wolfgang Simson, an observer of house churches and author of *Houses That Change the World*, says that an apostle is like a super-elder; an apostle oversees multiple house churches, or a house church network. Does it mean ‘bishop,’ meaning leadership and governance in traditional churches? Or does it mean ‘church planter’? Peter Wagner, former professor of church growth at Fuller, now calls himself an apostle for that reason. An acquaintance of mine here in Dorchester who was a pastor who now calls himself an apostle because he started a new kind of ministry. Does it mean ‘movement starter’ or ‘founder’ in a general sense? Does it mean ‘missionary’ as some people call it? I don’t think so. I think what’s happening in all these cases is that we should really use another word to describe those gifts: leadership, organizer, church planter, movement starter, missionary, and so on. They are valuable, but they should not be confused with true apostleship. So prophecy is the highest gift available to us.

No Gift is for All, No One Has All the Gifts

As Paul expands on the reality of the body of Christ, he says that we as individual members of the body of Christ are dependent on each other, because we have different gifts. In 12:29 – 30, he asks a series of rhetorical questions. ^{12:29} All are not apostles, are they? [The implicit answer is no.] All are not prophets, are they? [The implicit answer is no.] All are not teachers, are they? [The implicit answer is no.] All are not workers of miracles, are they? [The implicit answer is no.] ³⁰ All do not have gifts of healings, do they? [The implicit answer is no.] All do not speak with tongues, do they? [The implicit answer is no.] All do not interpret, do they? [The implicit answer is no.]

No one gift is held by all Christians, including prophecy. Even though Paul will later say that he wants everyone to seek all the gifts, especially prophecy, the base foundation of what we can stand on and expect is this: No one gift is held by all. Even Pentecostal scholar Gordon Fee admits that not every Christian can really speak in tongues. That is why we must not build general church ministries around a particular gift, as if everyone would have it. Now on the one hand, there are specialty meetings or ministries where you can develop a certain gift, and there is great use for times like that. But if a Christian community is going to be a church in the full biblical sense, we need to develop all the gifts in the context of Christ’s mission.

The flip side of what Paul is saying is that no one has all the gifts. The apostles might have had all the other gifts. But apart from them, no one has all the gifts. That’s clear because he asks these rhetorical questions and doesn’t answer it because he knows the answer and he knows that the Corinthians also know that the answer is: No; no one has all the gifts.

We Prophecy and Know in Part, Not in Full

There is another important qualification on how we speak a prophecy. It’s in the context of love and humility. ^{13:1} If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing... ⁸ Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

In the future there will be no prophecy because there won't be anything hidden that needs to be revealed. God will reveal Himself, everyone else, and everything. But for now, prophecy exists because we don't know everything. Prophecy reveals a small sliver of ultimate reality. Look at 13:9, 'We prophesy in part.' No one prophesies in full; we can only do it in part. Any prophecy has to be humble because it's a small part of the ultimate reality. I think most of us have had experiences with people who have said, 'I think God is saying this to you.' And because their own issues interfere with how they deliver what might be a legitimately prophetic word, they deliver it from an overbearing posture, as if the strength of their conviction will be what helps us believe. But the best prophecy is delivered from a posture of love, of humility, of the sense that we only know a little bit about the person even if God supernaturally reveals something to us about them. We only prophecy in part. So we must hold anything we get from God about someone else or even ourselves very humbly.

Desire All the Gifts, Especially Prophecy

Having said that, prophecy needs to be pursued and desired. You need to allocate some time to it. Paul says, ^{12:31} 'But earnestly desire the greater gifts....' ^{14:1} 'Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.' So if you're not pursuing it, you need to start! The immediate question is: How much time are you allocating to it? I would say that it has to be integrated with the serious study of Scripture. But it also means spending time in prayer for others, probably keeping a journal about this, and learning from others who are prophetic.

Prophecy Builds Up

Paul is now going to contrast it with tongues, which is one of the lesser gifts. ^{14:2} 'For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.' ³ 'But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.' ⁴ 'One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church.' ⁵ 'Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying...'

Here's a compact description of what prophecy is contrasted with tongues. Tongues is speaking to God. Prophecy is speaking to people. Tongues is something no one understands, unless someone interprets. Prophecy is something everyone understands. Tongues benefits the person speaking in tongues. Prophecy benefits 'the church,' that is, everyone who hears. Tongues is a good gift. Prophecy is a greater gift. Why does Paul make this distinction? Probably because tongues and prophecy represent two ends of a spectrum of speaking gifts. Prophecy has three main effects: edification, exhortation, and consolation. Once again, Paul is not interested in defining exactly how people hear a word from God. He is more interested in how you speak it to others. Let's take this short list one by one.

Edification comes from the construction trade. Edification is a big emphasis of Paul in chapter 14, because the word occurs seven times in v.1 – 26. An edifice is a building. Edification means 'to build.' The word can be also used for building a foundation, or repairing and strengthening a building that already exists. So prophecy is something stabilizes others – it stabilizes our life in Christ and trust in God. This is where prophecy is most similar to teaching and the two gifts overlap with one another. In that sense, a prophetic word reminds of God's truth when we are weak, or when our foundation feels unstable.

Exhortation is encouragement to do something. Maybe because you're afraid of something. It is the type of motivation that is highly relevant and brings conviction. It is someone taking the word of Jesus and wielding it like a sword, so that the sword goes in – *all the way in*. Prophecy is therefore challenging. In this sense, prophecy is a forthtelling. It is a revealing of the mind of God, the decree of God, the call of God, and the invitation of God. Prophecy can involve foretelling the future, as when Agabus the prophet foretold that there would be a famine in the Mediterranean world (Acts 11:27 – 30), but fundamentally, it is for the purpose of moving people into action, in that case to send relief funds to Jerusalem. In this sense, people who are about social justice have been called prophetic because they challenge the culture. We've talked about Chris' idea of raising money across multiple churches to give money towards summer jobs for youth as being prophetic. Here's another example: In my opinion, one of the most prophetic words of our generation is actually Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, because he challenges our cultural views of sexuality, abortion, bioethics, along with justice, based on the conviction that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, therefore our bodies also matter to God and ought to matter to each other. It is one of the most

edifying and exhorting words ever to emerge from the global church. This is my reason for doing 1 Corinthians in the Gathering.

Consolation is helping people connect with God in grief. Consolation is reminding people of God's goodness, presence, and promises when the situation seems bleak. Once when I was at an InterVarsity student retreat, a guy named Jordan Seng came with us to pray for people. I remember listening while he prayed for a particular student who was quite discouraged. He said, 'God sees you when you write in your journal, you know, the journal with the blue flowers on it?' Her eyes got really big. Whatever she was dealing with, she was consoled by the fact that the Lord knew her and her situation.

Putting together edification, exhortation, and consolation, we can see that prophecy is very personal and practical in how it touches us. It can be a question or a statement, a phrase or a full sermon, verbally communicated or in a written letter. It is simply allowing God to speak through you.

Illus: There was one occasion where I was praying with a friend about this her family. While we were praying, I saw a red capital letter A in my mind. I thought, 'That's weird.' But I shared it with her. She said, 'You mean like the book *The Scarlet Letter*?' That's the story where two people back in Puritan New England commit adultery and the woman winds up having to sew a big red capital letter A on her clothes. But the man – who is a minister who has been hiding his sin unconfessed – has a scarlet letter A burning through his skin. Both of us were puzzled that I saw a reference to a book. But a few days later, her father confessed to having had an affair over 20 years ago. It seemed like God was preparing my friend for this news, and to help her understand what her father was feeling inside. It was edifying in the sense that she was reminded that God knew about the situation and cared about her by bracing her for the news. It was an exhortation to have compassion on her dad. It was consolation for the sadness caused by the sin.

Prophecy is Versatile, for Believers First, Unbelievers Also

^{14:22} So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe. ²³ Therefore if the whole church assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; ²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

Here Paul seems to say that prophecy is for believers primarily, but is also effective with non-Christians. Dorman's story about running into his friend is an example of how a person who was vacillating in faith was challenged to believe that the Lord really wanted to speak to him. I've also been in conversations with non-Christians where something clicks.

Prophecy Challenges Hearts

That moves us quickly to the next point: prophecy discloses the heart's secrets, and can bring conviction. Paul says in 14:25, ²⁵ the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.'

Let Two or Three Prophecy

In v.26, Paul then describes how a Corinthian worship service was going. ^{14:26} What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation.' He's not saying that that is what should happen. He's not actually prescribing that each of us come with a worship song, a sermon, a prophetic insight, and so on. He's saying that that is the mark of people who are just monopolizing the time. Can you imagine if every week, each one of us wanted to preach, lead a song, share, and pray? Paul limits the elements of the service under one main point, edification, in v.26 – 29: 'Let all things be done for edification. ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; ²⁸ but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

Now here is where we have to think about this together. The format we have is not the format Paul is talking about. I think that's okay, but it means that we have to think about the translation. The weekly service that the Corinthian Christians had was modeled after the Jewish synagogue service. So there was a time in each weekly service for

different elements, and there was a time for 2 – 3 prophetic words to be given. We do not use the prophetic gift that way. We are using prophetic ministry to pray for each other. Again, I think that's fine, but we have to consider the values Paul puts out there.

The first value is shared airtime: He limits prophetic ministry to 2 – 3 people. Now again, we may have to translate this into our context. I don't know if we want to think about that to make sure people get equal air time. If you have a prophetic word for someone else, and you notice that person A has received a lot of prayer already, and that other people haven't shared yet, I would encourage you to share it with that person after the service or during the week. Or, should we also put a limit on how many people pray for any given person? I don't know. We'll have to come back to that.

The second value is patience. Just because you think it's from God, doesn't mean you have to say it. I would imagine that back in Corinth, there were a lot of people who wanted to share a prophetic word or share something in tongues. But because there was a limit, sorry, we're moving on. So, just because you think it's from God doesn't mean you have to say it. And after all, in our context where we are praying for individuals, it's easy to just share something privately later.

The third value is evaluation. In v.29, Paul says, ^{14:29} 'Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.' There is some way in which those who have the gift of prophecy are evaluated by others. I don't know exactly how this was done, or could be done here. But when I use other gifts, I get feedback. When I teach or do evangelism, people tell me, 'I was touched by this. I didn't agree with that. I was confused by what you said here; could you be more clear?' Every gift is only honed through evaluation and feedback. But prophecy is especially hard to evaluate because people sometimes use it as a trump card – with a 'thus sayeth the Lord' attitude – or because it seems like there's a groupthink going on, and being the dissenting voice is hard. Nevertheless we must have the courage and discipline to evaluate even prophetic words.

Illus: Let me give you an example of when evaluation is really important. A few years ago, a young man named Bernie Chang fell into a coma because of a debilitating disease. During the time when Bernie was in a coma, a number of his Christian friends at CCFC felt they had a prophetic word that Bernie would recover if people in the church pulled together. Because Bernie's body was fighting itself, they took that as an analogy of the church – it was fighting itself. There were some disagreements going on in that congregation. The thought was that if those people could pull together, then Bernie would be healed. I'm not sure how that was comprehensively handled within CCFC itself. A few but substantial number of people believed it. When one of my friends, who believed that interpretation and believed that it was indeed a prophetic word, told me about it, I immediately disagreed. It was not only that I had a sense in my spirit, but there were reasons that I could think through. Here's how I thought about it: I knew about some of the disagreements at this church, and I thought it was fundamentally a neutral issue of strategy and not an issue of doctrine or character. It seemed possible to me that the church could have divided into two and blessed each other to do different things. I believed that the disease in Bernie's body did *not* serve as an analogy for a disease within the congregation, because *many* diseases are the result of the body fighting itself; in that sense, his disease wasn't special. I believed that even if people in the congregation settled their disagreements, it did not guarantee anything about Bernie's life. Making a miraculous healing depend on other people's behavior is a recipe for manipulation, and it is bad theology, for it makes God out to be making Bernie suffer for the decisions of persons X, Y, and Z. And, sadly enough, I was not sure that Bernie would pull through, even though of course I hoped he would. Weeks later, Bernie died. Many of the people close to him not only left the church but left the faith. Perhaps that would have happened anyway, but I wonder if a better evaluation of that "prophecy" might have led to genuine edification, exhortation, and consolation?

How do we evaluate words of prophecy? That is also something we must do, within a biblical, theological, and pastoral framework. Not just to catch mistakes, but to refine our own gifts. We need to be able to help someone go from being a non-Christian to following the Spirit of Jesus, and prophecy in a group setting is an aspect of that. We need some kind of rhythm or structure with which to do that. It doesn't have to be complicated.

Prophecy Must Be Ordered

³⁰ But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; ³² and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; ³³ for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

No one is out of control. A person who can't control himself or herself isn't a genuine prophet. For the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.