UNDERSTANDING TONGUES AND PROPHECY

Gifts of Prophecy and Tongues

1 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. 2 For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. 3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified. (1 Corinthians, 14:1-5)

We should pursue both love and the gifts.

In chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, Paul encouraged to pursue the gifts. In chapter 13 Paul encouraged us to pursue love even more than we pursue the gifts. Now in verse 1, Paul tells us to do both at the same time: ‘Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts.’ We need to do all we can to love people, and to grow our capacity for loving people. This will govern the way we use the gifts of the Spirit. And, it will also increase the intensity with which we pursue the gifts. The gifts of the Spirit are, after all, powerful tools for building others up. When we love people we want for them more than what we in our own capacity can give them. We will want for them what God alone can do through his outpoured gifts. Said another way, the exercising of the gifts is one major way that we can love people.

Paul’s main point in chapter 14 is that, though tongues may be helpful to the person speaking it (even though they do not understand what the Spirit is enabling them to say), it is nevertheless entirely unhelpful to others, since they cannot understand it. The way of love dictates that when the church gathers, one should refrain from tongues (unless it is interpreted) since it does not help others. However, prophecy should be done when gathered because (if it is done correctly) it is helpful to others.
Let me now give an overview teaching on tongues and prophecy (Note, I will make much reference to verses that are still to come in the rest of chapter 14.)

**ABOUT TONGUES**

*What is tongues?*
1) It is a Spirit-inspired utterance (1 Cor 14:2 and Acts 2:4), in which case the Spirit enables a person’s own spirit to speak ‘mysteries’ (v2). It is not exactly the Spirit speaking through us, but rather the Spirit enabling our spirits to speak (see Acts 2:4).
2) Since it is our spirit that is speaking, our mind (the usual source of spoken words) is bypassed (1 Cor 14:14).
3) It is speech that is unintelligible to both the speaker (v14) and to the hearers (v16).
4) However, just because it is unintelligible does not mean that words uttered are without content or meaning. This is evidenced by a) the fact that there may be rare times when God gives a person an interpretation of their own tongue (v13), b) the fact that, in public, there is the possibility that God grants another person an interpretation of someone’s tongue (12:10), and c) the fact that there are some very rare cases where a person is enabled to speak a foreign language (Acts 2:4-12), which is understood without any need for interpretation.
5) It is speech directed towards God (1 Cor 14:2, 14-15, 28). In other words it is a form of praise (see Acts 2:4-11, especially verse 11) or a form of prayer (1 Cor 14:14).
6) Though a person may speak in tongues while being in an ecstatic state (as Acts 10:46 suggests), usually a person can speak in tongues in a non-ecstatic state (see 1 Cor 14:27-28, which gives regulations for public tongues, thereby implying that a person can start to and stop speaking in tongues at will.)

*Is tongues an actual language in existence in heaven, or on earth?* People are divided on this point. Those who believe it is an actual language argue a) the word translated ‘tongues’ can also be translated ‘language’, b) the possibility of ‘interpretation’ implies that it is a language, c) the mention of ‘tongues of angels’ (13:2) implies it is a heavenly dialect, and d) the rare instances where God enabled a person to speak in a earthly foreign language (Acts 2:11) imply that it is always some kind of language. Those who are not convinced it is an actual language argue that 1) the word ‘tongues’ can also be translated ‘speech’, 2) interpretation is not the same as translation, which is what would be needed if it were an actual language, 3) the mention of ‘tongues of angels’ could be taken to metaphorically mean ‘heavenly speech’ (i.e. speech that God alone understands), 4) the rare instances of speaking in foreign languages don’t necessarily imply that it is always some language in existence, and 5) observing those who do speak in tongues reveals that they tend to stay within the syllabic range of their own language (in other words, a Xhosa speaking person will have a very different sounding tongue to an English speaking person). My personal view is that usually tongues is not a language in existence, but rather a form of what Paul describes in Romans 8:26,27: ‘We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of...
the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.' I believe that God does enable us to speak apparently meaningless sounds and syllables, but that he attaches meaning to them.

Is the gift of tongues different to the other gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11? Yes, all the other gifts are always for the strengthening of the church. They are other-directed. But tongues is only sometimes other-directed, and this is when it is given in a church context and is followed by an interpretation. In this case it is similar to prophecy. But tongues is usually only for personal benefit. It is to be used in private, when one is alone.

Of what use is the gift of personal tongues? Tongues is a form of non-rational prayer or praise, and though it is non-rational, it is a useful way of drawing closer to God. It is for this reason that Paul claimed in his own personal devotional life to pray much in tongues (1 Cor 14:18). Though it is not helpful to sing or pray aloud an un-interpreted tongue in a meeting, it is possible to pray in tongues under one's breath in a meeting (v28). Though we do not know what it is we are saying (or singing (v15)), we are still edified or built up (v4) in the experience. As we pray it is possible for our hearts to draw close to God with a wordless expression of prayer (v15), praise (v16) and thankfulness (v17). It seems to have the potential of being a non-verbal form of Jude 10: ‘By building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God.’ In the same way that intimate human relationships require communication that is sometimes wordless (such as a smile, or a gesture of affection), so our communication with God also from time to time requires wordless communication, and the gift of tongues is one way of doing just that.

What is the difference between an interpreted tongue and a prophecy? Although there will be exceptions, the main difference is that prophecy is a ‘Spirit-inspired word from God’ whereas interpreted tongues is a ‘Spirit-inspired word to God’. Why do I say this? Answer: we’re told that tongues is a form of prayer (v15), praise (v16) or thanksgiving (v17). ‘For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God ... But everyone who prophesies speaks to men’ (v2-3). It only makes sense then, that if someone were to interpret a tongue it would most likely be directed toward God, or it would at the very least be about some aspect of God.

How do we receive the gift of personal tongues? The Bible does not give a decisive answer. What it does say is that 1) the experience of the Spirit’s infilling sometimes activates the gift of tongues (see Acts 2:1-4, 10:46, 19:6), and 2) we can ask God to give us specific gifts (v1, see also Matt 7:7-9), and this would certainly include tongues.
**ABOUT PROPHECY**

*What is prophecy?* Answer: prophecy is the Spirit-inspired speaking for God with God-given words to a person or to a group of people. It includes both the receiving of some revelation, as well as the sharing of that revelation.

*What effect is prophecy meant to have on the church?* It is meant to strengthen, encourage and comfort the church (v3). It is meant to edify the church (v4). Sometimes it will even establish the present priorities of a church (see Acts 11:27-28, 13:1-2 for examples of this).

*Does God want to give all Christians the ability to prophesy?* Yes. The fact that Paul tells us to eagerly seek it (v1,39) reveals something of God’s willingness to give it to his children. Though very few people in the Old Testament had the ability to prophesy, in the age of the Spirit that Christ’s exaltation has inaugurated, prophecy has become readily available to all. In Acts 2:17-18, Peter claims that the prophecy of Joel has come to fulfillment: ‘In the last days, God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.’ In any gathering of Christians it is anticipated that there would be several people who would be ready to bring a prophetic message of some kind (v29). Interestingly, we’re told that all four of Philip’s daughters were known for prophesying (Acts 21:9). The fact that Paul encourages people to pursue prophecy means that he believed there were not enough people with the gift, or at least exercising their prophetic gift. Moses rightly said, ‘How I wish that all God’s people could prophesy.’

*Is there a difference between Old Testament and New Testament prophecy?* Although there are some similarities, there are some notable differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Testament</th>
<th>New Testament</th>
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<tr>
<td>prophetic gifting was rare</td>
<td>far more commonplace</td>
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<tr>
<td>prophets were infallible (the sign of a false prophet was that they got even one prophecy wrong) and therefore needed to be instantly obeyed or believed</td>
<td>prophecies needed to be weighed before they are obeyed or believed</td>
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<tr>
<td>prophets, being the very mouthpieces of God, had the highest spiritual authority in God’s people (even higher than kings); prophets were accountable to no one but God</td>
<td>elders have higher spiritual authority; prophets are accountable to the elders</td>
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<tr>
<td>prophets most commonly prophesied warning and judgment to people who had rejected God and his ways</td>
<td>prophets generally encouraged God’s people</td>
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*Are there different degrees of prophetic gifting?* Yes. Although all Christians are encouraged by Paul to pursue prophesy as a gift, not all will have the privilege of moving in it to the same
degree. Though many Christians may prophesy from time to time, there are some Christians that seem sovereignly gifted by God to prophesy more regularly and with greater accuracy and power. The New Testament seems to refer to these people who are used exceptionally as ‘prophets’. Four sections in the New Testament show how instrumental they were in the life and mission of the church:

First, there’s Acts 11:27-28: ‘During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world’. Here we see that 1) some people are known as prophets because of the track record of their regular and accurate prophesying, 2) prophets sometimes predict or foretell and, 3) prophets can minister in more than just their own church.

Second, there’s Acts 13:1-2: ‘Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”’. Here we see that 1) local churches need more than just teacher-gifted people at the helm, 2) prophets especially excel in discerning the present priorities of the Lord for a group of people, or for a person, especially with regard to the mission God has for them to accomplish.

Third, there’s Acts 21:10-11: ‘After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’ “. Here we see that 1) prophets sometimes prophesy over individuals, 2) prophets may sometimes be led by God to use symbolic actions.

Lastly, there’s Ephesians 4:11-12: ‘So Christ himself gave some to be the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service’. Here we see that 1) certain highly gifted prophets partner with other key leaders in the advance of the church, 2) prophets seek to equip God’s people to specific works of service; in their case it is most likely the ability to prophecy that they encourage in the church.

What is the relationship between the Bible and prophecy? Both are the result of the Spirit’s revelation. The Bible is inspired by the Spirit so that it’s teachings, properly understood, are an infallible revelation from God. The Bible is all of God’s truth for all of God’s people at all times. But prophecy merely builds upon this revelation. It emphasises and highlights some of God’s truth to some of God’s people at some times. Any prophetic claim must never contradict what is taught in the Scriptures; if it does, it must be dismissed. However, prophecy can go beyond Scriptures without contradicting them. It does this when God wants to reveal specific information to a person or a church that is not doctrinal in nature. For example, when the
prophets helped discern that God wanted Paul and Barnabas to begin their missionary journey (Acts 13:1-2), this was not doctrinal in nature – it was the specific application of doctrine in a specific situation.

**What is the relationship between prophecy and preaching?** The Scriptures distinguish between the gift of teaching, and the gift of prophecy, so they are not the same thing. The teacher is concerned with leading God’s people into all the truth of the Scriptures. The prophet is concerned with leading God’s people into those specific truths that the Spirit is right now emphasizing. And generally a teaching is longer than a prophecy. That said, there can be considerable overlap of teaching and prophesy: this is when the Word of God is taught and applied in the power of the Spirit, along with a Spirit-guided spontaneous edge to it. Since the Scriptures are the work of the Spirit, it seems that this kind of prophetic exposition of the Bible is the highest form of prophecy.

**How does God give revelations?** In order to prophesy one must be able to receive direct revelations from God. Obviously, there are varying levels of intensity and clarity in these revelations. So, how do direct revelations come to a person? 1) Since prophecy is generally an emphasis or application of specific teachings in the Bible, very often a revelation comes as one reads or ponders parts of the Bible. But revelations will also come when one is not reading or thinking about the Bible at all. 2) Revelations seem more likely to come as one is drawing close to God in prayer or worship (see Acts 13:1-2 as example of this). 3) The most common way revelations come is through simple God-given ‘impressions’; this is when a thought comes to a person that they recognize to be a thought that comes from the Spirit. Two examples of this are Nehemiah who wrote, ‘So God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles’ (Nehemiah 7:5), and Paul who while preaching ‘saw the lame man had faith to be healed’ (Acts 14:9). In the latter example, it seems that Paul’s spiritual senses were quickened as he looked at the lame man, and he just knew that God was about to heal this man. 4) According to Acts 2:17-18, the ability to prophesy is often associated with God-given dreams and visions. This means that either while one sleeps, or while one is awake God may reveal a picture of some kind. Sometimes these pictures can be exceptionally vivid, but other times less so. 5) Then there are other more uncommon ways that a revelation may come: while one is having an ecstatic experience (see 1 Sam 19:19-24), is in a trance (Acts 10:10-19), encounters an angel, or hears an audible voice (sometimes it is only audible to the person).

**But how do we know a revelation truly comes from God?** We must proceed with caution since not every so-called revelation really comes from God. We’re told to test the authenticity and accuracy of prophecies and spiritual experiences (1 John 4:1, 1 Cor 14:29). There is such a thing as false prophecy. Even Christians can bring misguided prophetic words either out of their own imagination (Jer 14:14) or, more seriously, because of demonic deception (1 Tim 4:1). That is why the church is told to discern whether prophetic words really are from God (1 Cor 14:23). Just because a person has a vivid spiritual experience, and gets a revelation during that time, does not mean that the spiritual experience was necessarily God, or that the revelation was necessarily God – no matter how real and wonderful the experience may have been. Some basic pastoral advice follows: ‘Don’t trust feelings too much, even feelings that are
associated with love for God. Be willing to think, and be well taught by the Scriptures. Beware of prophecies that are predictive – not that they are impossible, but just that they need special care. Beware of excessive claims of direct guidance, of anything that makes ‘self’ predominant. And beware of the power of suggestion.’ Having said all of that, though the pitfalls of getting revelations from God are real, God still does give people direct revelations. And though we need to be aware of the devil’s ability to deceive us, we need to be in awe of God’s ability to lead us into the truth. And we can be encouraged by the fact that it is not so much our ability to receive a revelation as much as it is God’s ability to give a revelation that counts.

Some guidelines for prophesying: 1) Don’t be surprised that God speaks both to you and through you by drawing on your range of vocabulary, experiences, mental imagery, and level of doctrinal understanding. Generally speaking, the ‘raw material’ the Holy Spirit uses in a revelation is what’s already in you. 2) Don’t be surprised that as you begin to share the revelation that God gives you more. Much like pulling a tissue out of a tissue pop-up box, so as you share what God has shown you, more revelation appears, and as you share that revelation, yet more appears. 3) Don’t assume that just because God has given you a revelation that you know what it means, or how to share it (if you must share it at all). A good prayer to pray is this, ‘God, I believe you have given me this revelation. But what does it mean? And what do I do with it? Please show me.’ 4) Don’t say, ‘Thus says the Lord’ but rather, ‘I think / feel God is saying that’. Since New Testament prophecy is fallible, it is best to be humble in how we share it. 5) Don’t despise the day of small beginnings (Zech 4:10). Those whom God uses prophetically generally speak of a growing accuracy in their own journey of being used by God. At first God may give you some very simple revelations, but as you are faithful in sharing them, God begins to trust you with clearer, more accurate, more consistent prophetic messages. 6) Be very wise with what you do with predictive, confrontational, corrective or directive words. Since prophecy is generally to strengthen and encourage Christians (1 Cor 14:3), whenever you go beyond what it encourages to what predicts, confronts, corrects or directs you’re moving into unusual prophecy. These kinds of prophecy have a far greater capacity to impact people either for good, or for bad. The best thing to do is to submit these kinds of words to the pastoral leadership of your church. Let them decide what’s best to do with them.

How do we receive the gift of prophecy? The Bible does not give a decisive answer. What it does say is that 1) God sovereignly gives some gifts to us without us even asking for them (1 Cor 12:11), 2) the experience of the Spirit’s infilling sometimes activates the gift of tongues (see Acts 2:17-18, 19:6), and 3) we can eagerly ask God to give us the gift of prophecy (1 Cor 14:1,39 and Matt 7:7-9). Once God does grant us this gift, we need to exercise it by staying close to God, and by being ready to step out in obedience any moment God leads us. We’re told to ‘try excel in gifts that build up the church’ (1 Cor 14:12). So if God uses us prophetically, we should ask him to grow you in it more and more.

What do I do with a personal prophetic word that another person gives me? 1) Ask four questions: Does it line up or contradict the teachings of the Bible? Does it line up with what
God has already shown me in the past? Does it resonate or jar with my spirit? Does it leave me feeling peaceful or disturbed? 2) Understand that generally a prophetic word will merely confirm something God has already been showing you. 3) If the word is predictive (i.e. it tells you something will happen in your life), corrective (i.e. it confronts something negative in your life), directive (i.e. it tells you to make a certain decision), then show it to the leaders who watch over you. 4) Write them down and record them for future encouragement and evaluation. For example, Paul encouraged Timothy to recall the prophetic words he had received. They were words that detailed God’s plan to use him as a leader: ‘Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well’ (1 Tim 1:18).