

Prayers

To God

Seek the Lord's blessing, to lift your soul and show you the things of heaven even as you live here on earth!

For myself

Lord God; if we are troubled, lead us into Your peace; if our minds are confused, bring us Your understanding; if our hearts are broken, comfort us with Your love; if our strength is failing, touch us with Your healing; if our feelings are bruised, calm us Your Spirit's care. For in You, and in Your hands, we are blessed. AMEN

For others

Pray for those who try to escape poverty and who push themselves to the limit for the sake of finding freedom, especially young people searching for a better life

Meditation

Save us, O Lord, from the sins that oppress us
Because You have loved us and given us life.

Save the poor from being hurt and victimised,
And the rich from the perils of their wealth:

Save the sick from preoccupation with health,
And the healthy from presuming they will live:

Save the zealous from rashness of judgement,
And the contented from apathy's dangers:

Save the elderly from glorifying the past
And the young from trying to change everything.

Save us, and create in us hearts of true love
Love, for each other and love for Your world.

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

¹ Strive to love, but desire the spiritual gifts as well, most of all the gift of prophesy.

² For the one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to other people but to God; no one understands, since he speaks mysteries in the Spirit. ³ However, the one who prophesies speaks to build up, encourage and comfort other people. ⁴ Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church.

⁵ Now I would like it if all of you spoke in tongues, but I would rather that you prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets so that the church may be built up. ⁶ Fellow believers, if I had come to you speaking in tongues, how would this benefit you unless I offered you some revelation, knowledge, prophecy or teaching?

⁷ To give an example, if lifeless instruments such as the flute or the harp do not make different sounds, how will anyone know what is being played by each instrument? ⁸ And if the sound of a trumpet is not recognised, who will be ready for battle? ⁹ It is the same for yourselves; if through speaking in tongues you say words that are not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air.

¹⁰ There are undoubtedly many different languages in the world, and each one conveys meaning. ¹¹ So if I do not know the meaning of a language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. ¹² So it is with you; since you are eager for spiritual things, strive to have more than enough for the building up of the church. ¹³ So, one who speaks in a tongue must pray so that an interpretation can be given, ¹⁴ and if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.

¹⁵ What then should I do? I should pray in the Spirit, but also pray with understanding; and I should sing praise in the Spirit, but also sing praise with understanding! ¹⁶ For if you say a blessing in the Spirit, how can anyone who does not have such a gift say the "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since this person does not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ Or if you give thanks very well, the other person is not helped. ¹⁸ So I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; ¹⁹ yet, in church I would rather speak five understandable words in order to inform others, than ten thousand words in tongues!

²⁰ Fellow believers, do not think like children; only be like children in respect of evil, but be mature in understanding. ²¹ It is written in the scriptures,

'I will speak to this people through those who speak other languages and the lips of foreigners ... yet even then they will not listen to me,' says the Lord (Isaiah 28:11,12).

²² In this sense, tongues are a warning sign not to believers but to unbelievers, and prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.

²³ Yet if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and those who are not gifted arrive or unbelievers come in, will they not say you are insane? ²⁴ But if everyone prophesies, an unbeliever or ungifted person who enters is convinced by everything and challenged by everything, ²⁵ the secrets of His heart are unveiled, and that person will bow down before God and worship him, confessing that God is truly among you!

Review

This is one of Paul's more lengthy outbursts! If it takes a long time to read it, then if you follow the study below you will see how this all stands together as a firm message about the use of tongues and prophecy in worship. Whatever else we might think of as important for a service of worship, we are told here in Scripture that prophecy is key; but what does this mean? We will find out. Starting from a careful consideration of speaking in tongues and its value to Christian worship, as was found in the Corinthian church, Paul turns the whole subject of worship back to prophecy. He declares that speaking in tongues during worship should be made intelligible to all through the use of the gift of interpretation, which results in a prophetic word through which God speaks to His people and builds up the church.

Before we go further in this study, we should check out what we mean by 'prophecy'. Throughout these studies you will find that I keep closely to the understanding of prophecy as God's means of communication with humanity. Through prophecy God delivers His 'Word' to His people, sometimes through prophets, and sometimes through people who do not understand what they are saying is 'prophetic'. So, a prophet may be someone who tells us from God that something is about to happen if we will not change our ways. A prophet may also be a preacher who has set out to unashamedly proclaim God's Word. Paul now develops this point in six stages corresponding roughly with the paragraphs above, and these form the basis of our study.

Tongues and prophecy as used in worship (14:2-4)

Now to pursue to the main theme of prophecy and tongues. This passage describes the general worship life of God's people (14:4,19), meaning the worship of the whole church as well as the worship of small groups, like a 'house-group' today. Paul gives a picture of what is essentially public worship, in which Christians worshipped alongside interested non-believers (14:23), that is, people who had perhaps been invited. It may seem strange to us, but the features of this worship were tongues and prophecy. It all sounds rather radical; so what was going on?

It seems that people were using the gift of tongues as the main way of praising God. As in some churches today, the Corinthians valued this gift highly in their worship, and it also seems that no one minded if more

than one person spoke at the same time (14:2,15,23). Paul never denounces this gift because people who use it are honouring God (14:2), but he does say that the worship of God requires more. He explains that Christians should be built up in their worship, and for this they need to understand what is spoken in plain words such as those used in the delivery of a prophetic word from God, not just unintelligible tongues alone (14:3). He is content that both tongues and prophecy have their place, but, *'those who speak in a tongue build themselves up, but those who prophesy build up the church'* (14:4).

Tongues plus interpretation equals prophecy (14:5,6)

In verses 5 to 6, Paul now makes a dramatic observation, which solves the problem of the unintelligibility of tongues. He expresses the hope that *'all'* might speak in tongues (14:5), but now adds a new idea; for if what is said in tongues is subsequently interpreted, the end result is equivalent to prophesy! Unlike tongues, interpretation is intelligible and can therefore deliver the required benefit, so *'the church may be built up'* (14:5). How intriguing; tongues plus interpretation equals prophecy! But more than this, Paul envisages that interpretation will deliver a range of additional benefits for the church, in *'revelation, knowledge, prophecy, and teaching'* (14:6). Clearly, Paul sees the little valued gift of interpretation as a bridge between the often highly personal and deeply spiritual outpouring of speaking in tongues and the famous gifts listed for the governance and administration of the church (12:28).

Some examples to illustrate why intelligibility is important (14:7-9, 10-14)

To emphasise this, Paul turns to the world of music (14:7-9). He describes how musical instruments deliver different qualities of sound discernible to the ear as *'flute or harp ...'*, and when played together they blend into beautiful music (14:7). His point is that these instruments are valuable precisely because they are different; a fact that is the key to all good music! He offers the example of a trumpet, which has a distinct sound commonly associated with a call to battle (14:8). In worship, therefore, the church needs the varied and challenging blessings of God's prophetic word, not just the singular blessing of unintelligible tongues (14:9).

Paul uses yet another illustration (14:10-14). He lived at a time when people across the Roman world commonly spoke many languages; the common language of the Empire (Greek), and one or two local or regional languages as well. People generally understood the need for good understanding and interpretation so that everyone could enjoy the benefits of the Roman State, wherever they came from. Paul longed for the church to be built up and to grow in the world of his day, and in a similar way, he perceived that the gift of interpretation was essential for the development and growth of the church. Communication with God and with others was essential, and interpretation was an essential tool to enable this. Without it, there was ample room for confusion, whether of the Empire's many different languages, or of the gift of tongues.

Paul appeals for understanding in worship (14:15-19)

In the next paragraph (14:15-19), Paul continues this theme and appeals to the Corinthians to aim for *'understanding'* within their worship. He complains; *'if you say a blessing in the Spirit, how can anyone say the "Amen" to your thanksgiving?'* (14:16). Worship, he says, is about both honouring God and also helping others as well (14:17), and thus building up God's church. We should not gloss over the point, for although speaking here about tongues, we are given some unique and telling advice about the meaning of worship in the New Testament era. Paul adds a personal summary of his own feelings about all this, which in a strange way encapsulates all we have read so far in this chapter; *'So I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; yet, in church I would rather speak five understandable words to inform others, than ten thousand words in tongues!'* (14:18-19)

An odd part of the chapter - what does it mean? (14:20-22)

Verses 20 to 22 are a rather strange insertion into this passage, because at one point, as we will see, it appears to contradict the main message of this passage! His earlier is that tongues are meaningless to those who come into the church as unbelievers and must be interpreted, and the gift of prophecy makes God's Word meaningful to unbelievers. But in verse 22, he seems to say the opposite; *'tongues are a warning sign not to believers but to unbelievers, and prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers!'* What is going on?

To begin with, Paul implores the Corinthians to be mature (14:20), because he is concerned that the church of God might fall into the trap of unbelief which bedeviled the Old Testament people of God. He quotes a famous passage from Isaiah in which the prophet despairs of Israel's immaturity, in not accepting the signs and miracles God does for them (14:21). So when God's people fail to listen to Him, His gifts and graces have the opposite function; tongues becomes a *'warning sign ... to unbelievers'*, and *'prophecy'* becomes God's word for *'unbelievers'* (14:22). All this is a sign of the failure of the church to use God's gifts as they are intended.

The church in worship, bringing conviction and blessing (14:23-25)

In the last paragraph Paul returns to his main theme, lest we have been side-tracked by his previous Old Testament quote, and he does so with forthrightness. Surely, he asks, ordinary people who hear the gift of

tongues will think those who do this are insane (14:23)? But if these tongues are interpreted and the gift of prophecy is properly used in worship, great things can happen, and he then calls on all God's people to prophesy! He says, 'if everyone prophesies ...' (14:24) then God's Spirit is set free amongst those who worship, for conviction (14:24), revelation, worship and confession (14:25)!

So without a doubt, Paul regards prophecy as an essential key to our spiritual worship, whether the gift is used directly, or it results from the interpretation of a tongue. Whether and how this might fit into the life of the church today remains for us now, the big question!

Discipleship

Application

Tongues and worship

The gift of tongues splits the church today. Some tolerate it, some will not have it, and some parade it as a sign of God's approval! So what does this passage tell us. At least, it should suggest to us that instead of backing away from the issues and using the gift primarily in private, as many Christians do, we should actively consider its use in public worship.

Perhaps if prophecy was a more obvious feature of our worship, then we might accept the combination of tongues and interpretation more readily. More of that shortly, but while I know that many people speak in tongues even within the most staid of congregations, I suspect few believe they have the gift of interpretation. When we hear a tongue, even when we hear it in private, perhaps each of us should wait on God to consider whether we might have this precious gift that turns a tongue into a meaningful declaration of God's precious word for someone.

Prophecy and worship

We are far too dominated by the idea that prophets foretell the future. If we avert our eyes from this feature of prophecy and look at what the New Testament says, it is an incredibly important gift. Prophecy is the gift by which God reveals His Word, and as Paul has just said, little is of more importance, except 'love' (1 Cor 13).

The nature of worship is changing today, not least because of new songs and music. Yet God has already revealed that as we worship, He wants to reveal Himself and speak to us, and this happens when the prophetic gift is used to the full. Some have a special prophetic gift for preaching, but most have this gift in small measure, to bless others and as Paul says here, for the '*building up of the church*'.

Prophecy, however, should not be a rare insert into worship, it should dominate all we say and do, for both leader and congregation. If we are aware of and use our prophetic gifts, God will speak to us through our songs, prayers, readings, testimonies, sermons, responses, communions, and all we treasure this as worship! And remember, prophecy is a gift to be used within God's love, no more, no less.

Ideas for what to do

- *Think of the worship in your church. Can it be called 'prophetic' in any sense? Pray for a revelation of how worship may be prophetic*
- *Ask yourself what is going on when you say words of encouragement to others, or bless them. Is this not God's Word for them, and is it not therefore prophetic in some small sense? Use the gift ...*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *What can we learn here about the gift of tongues?*
2. *What can we learn about prophecy and worship?*
3. *How can we enable our worship to be a time when God's Word is heard, and prophecy takes place?*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, may we offer you prophetic worship! May we be ready to hear Your Word speaking to us within our worship, and be ready to respond. Make us expectant of great things, we pray: **AMEN**