

1 Corinthians 14
On Spiritual Gifts
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Where have you been when the best moments of your life have happened?

- Standing in front of a notice board in the university perhaps when you saw you had passed your degree?
- With your friends at school maybe on a hot August morning as you collected your GCSE or A-level results?
- On a beach, mountain or hill when you proposed or were proposed to?
- In the stands at Wembley or the Millennium stadium when your team scored a winning cup final goal?

I wonder how many of your best moments have happened in a Christian meeting?

One of mine has – getting married! The others have been in a hospital room – my daughter Rosie being born, and sitting in my room in a student halls of residence – becoming a Christian.

And it has to be said that when I got married, and I apologise now to anyone who was a guest at the wedding, it wasn't the fact that any of the rest of you were there that made it one of the best days of my life!

How highly should we expect Christian meetings to rank on the list of great things that happen in our lives? How much ought we to hope for when we gather together – whether on a Sunday or in the week – as a group of Christian people? Is it realistic to expect "church" to be the highlight of our week?

Maybe you're not a Christian here this morning and the idea that any Christian meeting could be anything other than dull and dutiful is a bit of a surprise to you – it certainly was to me when I became a Christian.

Maybe you are a Christian here this morning and your experience of Christian meetings – maybe even your experience here at Christ Church – has not been a very happy one. Maybe you're quite cynical about the whole idea of Christians meeting together, especially in large groups like this one.

It wouldn't have been at all surprising if that was exactly how a significant proportion of

the Christians in Corinth had felt about their church meetings. After all we know that this was a church that was struggling to express itself in a Christian way when they met together. Only in the previous chapter Paul has stingingly rebuked them, by means of the beautiful poem on love that we looked at last week – love that was singularly lacking in their church family.

We've seen how some of the church members were taking others to court. And we've seen how the people who thought themselves spiritually superior – and who were probably also financially wealthier – set themselves up with different food, and maybe even a different room, at the Lord's Supper.

It wouldn't have been surprising, would it, if there were lots of Christians in Corinth who had begun to despair of the possibility of any meeting of their church being even vaguely good, let alone making it into their list of greatest moments of your life.

So as Paul's letter begins to reach its conclusion – after this chapter there is one more major section, chapter 15, that we'll be looking at in a few weeks time..

As Paul begins to draw things together he finishes the long section on what should happen when Christians meet together – which he began back in chapter 11 – by telling us what a good Christian meeting should achieve – and how it should look and feel to the people who participate.

1 A good Christian meeting builds up Christians (v1-19)

Which is better – an i-Pod music player that can hold 900 CDs worth of music or our church PA system?

It's a ridiculous question of course isn't it? I mean it just depends what you want to do with it. If you want to listen to some music on the way into work in the morning on the train I'm guessing that you wouldn't find carrying two massive speakers on stands particularly handy – and indeed that you'd have a bit of trouble plugging it in. In the other hand I can't see us all being amused if one day you pitched up and I asked you all to gather round a pair of in ear headphones so that we could hear the music to sing to.

Which is better? It just depends on what purpose you want to use it for.

Sadly throughout church history, and especially in the last 100 years, Christians have tried to use the passage in front of us to try and establish some absolute comparison of the two gifts that Paul spends most time discussing – prophecy and tongues.

Some from a more conservative tradition have tried to establish that speaking in tongues – that is other, non-human languages – is really the least of all gifts and basically a bit rubbish. The trouble with that, of course, is that it doesn't really make a lot of sense of v18 – where Paul, the great apostle, makes it clear that he, personally, is very glad that he exercises this gift all the time in private.

And many from a more Pentecostal or "charismatic" tradition have tried to establish that prophecy (whatever that means, and we'll come to that in a bit) is really the greatest of all gifts and is the thing all Christians should really be seeking and is the thing we should all be expecting in our meetings all the time (whatever it is).

But to think like that is to completely misunderstand the sort of comparison Paul is making here. Paul is talking about two gifts – prophecy and tongues – and comparing them, not in absolute terms, but in terms of their usefulness in the Christian meeting.

Look at v3-4.

The one who prophesies in the Christian meeting is greater not because tongues is a rubbish gift, or because prophecy is the greatest gift in the world. He is greater because the point of the Christian meeting is to build up believers and prophecy is a gift that does that. It builds up believers.

Paul provides some examples for us of musical instruments, v7, and of a battle call on a bugle v8.

His conclusion, v12, is that if they want gifts to be manifest in their meetings they should seek gifts that build up the church.

What that means in practice, v13, is that the Corinthians who have the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues should pray that they may be able to understand what they say so they can offer an interpretation in plain everyday Greek to the rest of the congregation.

Paul, v18, is thankful for the gift of tongues, which he has. But in church (as opposed to when he's on his own) he would rather speak 5 words everybody can understand than 10,000 words they wouldn't.

So what does this mean for us?

Can I say that whatever prophecy is (and we really are coming to that in a minute), the application of this passage to us is not that we should seek to prophesy (whatever that is) when we meet together. Prophecy is not the be all and end all in this passage. Prophecy and tongues are just examples of gifts – one that builds up other people and one that, v4, builds up only the person with the gift.

There is nothing wrong with a gift that edifies only you. Nothing wrong with it. Paul is thankful for it himself. But edifying yourself is not the point of Christians meeting together.

One of the commentators on this passage puts it really helpfully like this:

"The building up of the community is the basic reason for corporate settings of worship; they should not be turned into a corporate gathering for a thousand individual experiences of worship."

So when we meet together the welcoming and the shaking hands and the seeing new people and catching up with old friends and drinking coffee and praying with someone and sharing what you've read in the Bible his week and nudging the person next to you during the talk to check if you got something that was said right and whatever else is not incidental to a meeting that is meant to be your experience with God.

Because our meeting is not meant to be your personal experience with God. It is our corporate, together, family, body, meeting with each other, as God is present in each of us by his Spirit, to encourage one another.

So we are to want to exercise gifts today that build up the body.

Hence prophecy (whatever it is) rather than tongues, or at least tongues with interpretation.

Prophecy is not the greatest gift. Tongues is not the least gift.

For the purposes of the Christian meeting prophecy is better than tongues.

That doesn't mean prophecy is the best gift in the Christian meeting. It doesn't mean we have to have prophecy when we meet (whatever it is).

It means when we meet our primary concern should be to build up other Christians and that we should seek any gift that helps us do that.

OK. So what is prophecy?

Doesn't really matter to understanding 1 Cor 14 what it is as long as we know if builds up believers! So if you want to tune out for next 5 minutes that's fine. Complex!

The most helpful way to think about the subject of prophecy in the New Testament is by comparing and contrasting it with prophecy in the Old Testament.

The books of the Old Testament which we call the prophets are the 17 books that run from Isaiah to Malachi. However Jewish thought always considered that the greatest prophet was Moses – which means that much of what we call the Old Testament law can also be considered, in some way, prophetic.

As one looks at the subject of prophecy in the New Testament it becomes clear that there are both similarities and differences with the Old Testament.

Let's look at the similarities first.

Firstly it seems that prophecy in both cases sometimes predicts future events.

But this is not all it does. Most prophecy in the Old Testament actually just applies the things God had already said to the situations that God's people were in at that present time. And it seems, for example from Acts 2, that prophecy in the New Testament era could often do something similar.

But there are also differences.

In the Old Testament the prophet – an Isaiah for example – if he was genuine, was the final arbiter of what God was saying to the people of God.

But in the New Testament that privilege belongs not to the prophets but to the apostles – those personally commissioned by the risen Jesus to take his message across the known world.

We'll see at that end of this chapter, and in lots of other places in the New Testament, Paul asserts his authority over the churches

as an apostle. In particular in this letter he tells the Corinthian prophets that the true test of their spirituality is whether they listen to him. So in that respect the New Testament and Old Testament prophets are quite different.

As a result of this it seems that prophecy in the New Testament has less authority than in the Old Testament. In Acts 21 a man named Agabus makes some predictions about what will happen to Paul if he goes to Jerusalem – that he will be bound and captured. He and the other believers then plead with Paul not to go.

Not only does Paul take no notice of their pleading – showing that even where the prophecy is true the prophets conclusions about what you should do with that information are not binding.

But in fact several of the details of the prophecy turn out not quite to happen as predicted.

I know of no OT prophecy like that and I think we can only conclude that prophecy in the New Testament, like teaching in fact, is a mixed bag. It may contain things that are exactly what God has said, but there may be other inaccurate human interventions.

That doesn't mean, by the way, that we have any cause to doubt the Bible because the truth of the prophecies about the future contained in the NT are tied to the final authority of the apostles – whose words, recorded for us in the NT, are Scripture, and which we can trust, literally, with our lives.

So what can we conclude?

Prophecy in the New Testament is a gift of God given to build up the church.

Prophecies are revelations of God which may either have given special insight into the application of what God had already said to the present congregation or predicted future events not already outlined by the OT or the apostles.

Whichever they were, and it may be either or both, they never undermined the unique authority of the Scriptures (that we call the OT) or the teaching of the apostles (that we call the NT).

All prophecy, 14:29, was to be weighed by the church – that is to say that it was to be tested against the Bible not just accepted because someone called a "prophet" said so.

Prophets had no authority to tell other Christians what to do with their lives on the basis of their prophecies. The task of shepherding in the New Testament belonged to the pastor-teacher and in all cases believers are bound only to do what the Bible tells us to do.

So if somebody comes to you today and tells you they have had a prophecy that you must do X or Y or Z. Even if you've never met them before and they can tell you 50 things about yourself they couldn't possibly know naturally you are not bound to follow their advice, unless their advice is something the Bible tells you to do. Paul didn't!

Prophecy is an intelligible gift of God to build up the church.

I don't think we can know much more about what it was in the NT than what I've outlined. And it seems to me that most people who are very dogmatic about what prophecy was are reading back into the Bible what they want to see.

What that means for us is that we may well exercise the gift of prophecy without knowing it or calling it that – when someone makes a particularly insightful application in your home group for example. It means we should expect that from time to time God will reveal interesting but not essential things about the immediate future to his people. And it means that whatever anyone says in a church meeting should build others up and must be tested against the Bible.

2 A good Christian meeting converts unbelievers (v20-25)

Intelligibility then is the key to a good Christian meeting.

So does that mean that a tongue with an interpretation is, in fact, just as good as a prophecy?

No it isn't, says Paul, because tongues, before their interpretation, will have an effect on the unbeliever.

It's interesting to note, isn't it, that Paul's assumption was that there would be non-Christians in the Christian meeting. Churches are not meant to be holy huddles – their meetings, our meetings, should regularly attract visitors who are not Christians.

These verses are by far the most difficult bit of this chapter so let's just try and unpack them a little.

Paul quotes, in v21, from Isaiah 28:

"Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me" declares the Lord.

So, Paul says, tongues are a sign for unbelievers, not for believers.

In other words the strange languages that the Israelites experienced back when foreign nations invaded their land are a sign of God's judgment on them. And the effect of that, in Isaiah, was that even then the people would not listen.

The effect of these tongues was to harden people in their unbelief – tongues are for unbelievers.

So, v23, if an unbeliever comes in when there is speaking in tongues in the church what will they think? That, v23, the Christians are mental.

So tongues now can have the same effect as the languages of the invaders in Isaiah's day – they are a sign of God at work but not a sign that leads to repentance and faith.

Prophecy however, v22, is for believers. It brings about belief. So if someone comes in when there is prophecy they will be, v24 and 25 convicted and converted.

We're not told exactly what will be in such a prophecy but it must include something that makes the outsider realise they are a sinner and it must include some gospel truths about God – because the person recognises that the true God, the God of the Bible, is present with the church.

What does that mean for us?

Well firstly it means that as we engage with friends, neighbours colleagues, we should be prepared to invite them to come and join us in our meetings and perhaps especially in our Sunday meetings.

When was the last time you personally invited someone to church? And if the reason that you haven't is because of something we do at church, then tell us – because it probably means we ought not to do it.

Most churches today don't often have people speaking in tongues. But lots of them might as well! Because church language can often be utterly incomprehensible to the outsider.

At CCL we try to be careful in what we say and the way we say it. So that anyone who comes here and is not yet a Christian will hear God's word and be convicted of sin, realise the reality of judgment and come to worship the Lord. They will recognise that the Lord is truly among his people.

3 A good Christian meeting reflects God's orderly character (v26-40)

I wonder if you've ever been stalked? I frequently find that in department stores I am stalked by noise. Music in the toilets, customer service announcements in the lifts, promotional DVDs on big plasma screens hanging about the shop floor. Often, of course, noise – whether speech, music or the sounds of nature, is helpful, informative, even beautiful. But unwanted noise, multiple clashing sounds all at once is disorientating, confusing and generally very irritating.

And that, Paul says, is particularly true in the Christian meeting.

V26-35 are not a strict lesson plan for how Christian meeting must be run. He's not saying that there must be tongues followed by prophecy, followed by weighing prophecy, followed by going home.

Though of course these verses do encourage us that in the early church the meeting wasn't run by one person from the front but that there were a number of people who spoke, prayed or whatever during it.

But the point here is not the content of the meeting so much as the style.

They are to speak in turn. There is to be respect for other people. They are to be considerate so that everyone can LEARN.

And this style of meeting – not confused by orderly (and orderly is definitely not the same as dull!) is actually rooted in the very character of God himself.

God is not a God of confusion but of peace. Christian meetings are to be peaceful not confused. That doesn't mean they can't be exuberant, or noisy or joyful or enthusiastic.

But it does mean they must not be chaotic – those of you who are about to start of the exec of City CU take note. What will you do to

make sure your main meetings reflect this Bible priority?

It is in that context that the controversial bit about women comes in this chapter. Some people, including one of the best known evangelism commentators on 1 Corinthians, dismiss v33b-35 as not being part of Paul's original letter. Let me tell you that this is not a good enough way of dealing with this passage!

To start with there's an obvious connection with what's gone before. The women are not the only people who are asked to be silent are they? Look at v28 – if there is not one to interpret let each one of them [that is the tongues speakers] keep silent in church. Or v 30 – if a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.

So this is part of a general pattern where Paul asks numerous groups of people to be silent for different reasons.

The second thing to say is that Paul here can't mean that women are not to say ANYTHING in the church meeting because we know that he is quite happy for them to pray and to prophesy from chapter 11. So when Paul asks the women to be silent it must relate to some specific part of the meeting.

Given that the context is to do with people giving prophecies the most likely explanation is that Paul is saying that the women of the church shouldn't publicly evaluate the prophecies given by the standard of the Bible – because that would be to take on the role of the teacher/leaders in the church – a role that Paul is quite clear elsewhere should follow God's creation pattern and be male.

What does that mean for us? I think it means that it is the place of the leaders of the church, the elders, who should be men to publicly evaluate the teaching we receive as a church and the things people say in the church meeting.

And it is for all of us to weigh what we hear, to discuss it in our families and to ask the church leaders privately if we have any disagreements with what anyone else says in our public meetings.

The principle here is that God is a God of peace and our meetings together should be peaceful – both to commend the Christian message to visitors and so that we can all grow and learn together.

In the end you see, what really matters is that when we meet as Christians what happens is what Paul tells us should happen.

Paul is the personal messenger of the Lord Jesus Christ, who wrote this letter, which is God's Word for us.

So if we are truly spiritual, if we know God and love Jesus, the result will be, first of all, that we will recognise Paul's Spirit-filled words that come from God, to the Corinthians, for us.

And if we do that we will seek passionately to do things that build up the church family, we will not forbid anything that encourages individual believers and we will do everything in a fitting and orderly way.

Some of the best moments of this life should happen when we meet together as Christians.

Our expectation when we meet should be that Christians will be encouraged and built up, non-Christians will be converted and all that we do together will reflect God's character.

It is all our jobs to seek God's grace and ask him that he would enable us to do that.

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