

## J Vernon McGee on 1 Cor 14

### GIFT OF PROPHECY IS SUPERIOR TO GIFT OF TONGUES

Paul now follows right on and says that we should follow after love, but we should desire spiritualities.

**Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy [[1 Cor. 14:1](#)].**

We should desire spiritual gifts—I think it would be unusual if a Christian didn't want that—"but rather that ye may prophesy." To prophesy is to give out the Word of God, to speak it simply and to speak it intelligently.

He makes a distinction between the gifts which the Spirit gives and the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, etc., which are more important than the gifts of the Spirit. Some very sincere people say to me, "Dr. McGee, I am going to pray that you receive the gift of the Spirit." I tell them I appreciate their interest, but I would rather they would pray that I may have the fruit of the Spirit. I wish I could see more fruit of the Spirit in the lives of the believers and in myself. I would like to see more love. That is the essential thing, and that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit of God can produce fruit in our lives.

"But rather that ye may prophesy." Actually, Paul was trying to get the Corinthians off this preoccupation with tongues. In effect he is saying to them in this whole section, "Cool it, brethren, don't go off into fanaticism or an emotional binge. Hold all things in their right proportion." In the previous chapter he said that tongues will cease. They will stop. That is the same word that we see posted on the highway. A traffic officer once told me that s-t-o-p means stop! I am afraid a great many folk do not understand what Paul is saying here: "Whether there be tongues, they shall stop." It was Dr. A. T. Robertson who made this statement: "Tongues seem to have ceased first of all the gifts." Chrysostom, one of the early church fathers, writing in the third or fourth century, stated: "This whole passage is very obscure; but the obscurity arises from our ignorance of the facts described, which, though familiar to those to whom the apostle wrote, have ceased to occur."

It is interesting to note that Jesus never spoke in tongues. There is no record of the apostles speaking in tongues after Pentecost. We do not have a historical record of Paul speaking in tongues or any sermon delivered in a tongue—although we know from verse [18](#) that Paul did speak in tongues because he said, "I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all." I did not realize the import of this statement until I was in Turkey. I visited the ruins of seven churches there, and obviously Paul had preached in all of them; then going way out into the interior, into Anatolia, I realized that Paul had walked across that section—all the way from Tarsus, his hometown. It is a distance of hundreds of miles, and in that section there was tribe after tribe speaking different languages. I have often wondered how Paul was able to speak to them. Well, he spoke as the apostles did on the Day of Pentecost. Every man heard him speak in his own tongue. He probably said to the Corinthians, "If you want tongues, go out on the mission field and start speaking in the languages of those people."

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Today God has raised up certain organizations like the Wycliffe Bible Translators who are attempting to translate the Bible into all the known tongues of the world. That, my friend, is the greatest tongues movement that I know anything about!

We know that at one time Paul was caught up to the third heaven. He tells us that he heard *unspeakable* words. I don't think those were *unknown* words or unknown tongues; they were words that he was not permitted to speak. Tongues are not a rapturous, ecstatic, mysterious language. They are not a mixed-up medley of rhapsody. Tongues were foreign languages. On the Day of Pentecost the apostles spoke in foreign languages so that every man there heard the gospel in his own language.

Now notice that chapter [14](#) is an extension of the love chapter. It begins: "Follow after charity [love], and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy."

**For he that speaketh in an unknown tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries [[1 Cor. 14:2](#)].**

Note that the word *unknown* is in italics in your Bible, and that means it is not in the original Greek. Nowhere in the Bible does it speak of unknown tongues. It should read: "For he that speaketh in a tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries." Because nobody will understand him, he is not to speak in a language that is unknown to the group—unless somebody there can interpret.

We will see in this chapter that there are three gifts which Paul emphasizes: prophecy, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. Have you ever noticed that there is very little reference to tongues in the Bible except in these three chapters? There are references to it in [Mark 16:17](#) and [Acts 2:3–4](#), [11](#); [10:46](#); [19:6](#). Cornelius and his household spoke in tongues. The disciples of John in Ephesus spoke in tongues after Paul had preached the gospel to them. We find, therefore, that tongues were used at the institution of the dispensation of grace. Every time tongues were used, they were used in that connection. There was speaking in tongues on the Day of Pentecost when the gospel went to the nation of Israel. There was speaking in tongues at the home of Cornelius when the gospel was opened to the Gentiles. There was speaking in tongues in Ephesus when the gospel moved out into the uttermost parts of the earth. Those are the three instances.

"For he that speaketh in a tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God: for no man understandeth him; howbeit in the spirit he speaketh mysteries." That is, he doesn't understand it.

**But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort [[1 Cor. 14:3](#)].**

Paul is emphasizing the gift of prophecy. He asks them not to go into the tongues which were delighting them, but to speak the Word of God which is for edification, for comfort, and for exhortation.

**He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church [[1 Cor. 14:4](#)].**

The tongue, when it is exercised by the individual, is a selfish sort of gift, but prophesying, or teaching, is for the edification of the church.

**I would that ye all spake with tongues, but rather that ye prophesied: for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the church may receive edifying [[1 Cor. 14:5](#)].**

To prophesy is to give forth the Word of God. The important thing is not a tongues meeting but a Bible study. "He that prophesieth" is one that teaches. No one is to speak in tongues unless there is someone there to interpret so learning can take place.

**Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? [[1 Cor. 14:6](#)].**

Paul is saying, "If I don't make any sense when I come to talk to you, what is the use of my coming?"

**And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped?**

**For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? [[1 Cor. 14:7-8](#)].**

I have often thought that I could be a musician if I could do with a musical instrument what the "unknown tongues" folk do with sounds. Although I cannot read music and have no ear for it, I could just toot away on a horn. But of course it would just be a meaningless noise. Even a lifeless instrument like that is to have meaning in this world.

"If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" The trumpet was used to alert the troops for battle. And, my friend, today we need a clear-cut presentation of the gospel.

**So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air [[1 Cor. 14:9](#)].**

Paul says in effect, "Let's get off this kick. Let's start making sense, if you don't mind."

**There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me.**

**Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church [[1 Cor. 14:10-12](#)].**

There are many languages in the world. However, there cannot be communication between people who do not speak the same language. If you speak in a language that no one in the church can understand, how can this edify the people in the church? That is the important issue. Does it edify the church? Does it build up the believers?

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**Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret [[1 Cor. 14:13](#)].**

Anything that is said in a tongue should be interpreted. Otherwise it does not make any sense to anyone. If the speaker cannot interpret, then there must be someone else there who has the gift of interpretation.

**For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful [[1 Cor. 14:14](#)].**

That, my friend, is the answer to those who say that they speak in tongues for their private devotions. If the “understanding is unfruitful,” you don’t get a spiritual lift out of it; that is, the Holy Spirit is not ministering to you. If you get a lift, it is merely psychological. Paul says your understanding is unfruitful.

**What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also.**

**Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? [[1 Cor. 14:15–16](#)].**

In other words, say something profitable so a brother can say “amen” to it.

**For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified.**

**I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all:**

**Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue [[1 Cor. 14:17–19](#)].**

Now I think Paul means that, as a missionary, he had spoken in at least a dozen different tongues—and probably that could be multiplied by four or five. When he was out on the mission field with a foreign tribe, they couldn’t understand his language and he couldn’t understand theirs. Then he spoke to them in their tongue. He made sense to them, but it didn’t make sense to Paul himself. But when he is in the church where there are believers who speak the same language as he does, he will speak in a tongue that everyone can understand.

**Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men [[1 Cor. 14:20](#)].**

He is chiding the Corinthians again. He has called them carnal—babes in Christ. Now he tells them not to act like children.

**In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord [[1 Cor. 14:21](#)].**

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You see he *does* mean a language that is understood. He says, "I am going to speak to another people in *their* tongue."

**Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe [1 Cor. 14:22].**

This is what he is saying: "When I went out to the mission field [let's say Antioch in Pisidia], they were speaking a different language, so I spoke to them in their own tongue. And when I presented the gospel to them in their own language, they believed. Now when I meet with these folk in the land of Israel, I speak in the language they know and I know. Therefore I am prophesying. That is, I am teaching the Word of God to them."

#### ORDER IN LOCAL CHURCH FOR EXERCISE OF ANY GIFT

**If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? [1 Cor. 14:23].**

**W**e do not want a stranger to step into the church and think he has entered into a group of people who have gone mad. If there is one thing we need today, it is the logical, meaningful presentation of the Word of God. People in this world are intelligent; they are scientific; they are sophisticated. They want a logical message which can be understood. The Word of God needs to be presented so it can be understood.

**But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all:**

**And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face, he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth [1 Cor. 14:24-25].**

In other words, if you are preaching the Word of God and an unbeliever comes in, he will come under conviction and be converted.

**How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying [1 Cor. 14:26].**

If there is going to be any speaking in a tongue, there must be an interpreter there, and the message must be edifying. A former student of mine, who had been a Roman Catholic, went into a tongues meeting and recited part of a mass in Latin. When he sat down, another man rose to interpret. He went on to say this, that, and the other thing. Then this friend of mine got up and said, "I just want you to know that *that* is not what I said. I gave you the Latin mass." And as he started to tell them what he had really said, the ushers hustled him out of the meeting and told him not to come back. I don't blame them for that, and I do not think it was

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proper for my friend to do that. I simply tell this to emphasize the fact that speaking in a tongue may be the least edifying and may even be a hoax.

**If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret.**

**But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God [[1 Cor. 14:27–28](#)].**

Not only must there be edification, but there must be order. If someone is going to speak in a tongue, there must be an interpreter, and the message must make sense in conformity with the Word of God. If it is otherwise, the Spirit of God is not in it—you may be sure of that. If no interpreter is there, or if two or three have already spoken, the one wanting to speak in a tongue is to be silent. He can go off somewhere and speak by himself.

**Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge.**

**If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace [[1 Cor. 14:29–30](#)].**

There were prophets in the church of that day, and they could speak prophetically. We know that the daughters of Philip prophesied (see [Acts 21:9](#)). In the same chapter we are told that Agabus also prophesied. We don't have that gift of foretelling the future anymore. Even the weatherman doesn't do very well in the area of prediction!

**For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted [[1 Cor. 14:31](#)].**

They may all prophesy one by one. Everyone can have something to say about the Word of God. I have been greatly blessed by statements that some folk have made in testimony meetings.

**And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.**

**For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints [[1 Cor. 14:32–33](#)].**

A church service is to be orderly.

**Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law [[1 Cor. 14:34](#)].**

Now what is he talking about here? Tongues. He is not saying that a woman is not to speak in church; he is saying that she is not to speak in tongues in the church. My friend, if you take the women out of the tongues movement, it would die overnight. You may say, "That's not a nice thing to say." I know it's not nice, but it is true.

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**And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.**

**What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? [[1 Cor. 14:35–36](#)].**

The Word of God came *to* them, of course.

**If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.**

**But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant [[1 Cor. 14:37–38](#)].**

This is the real test. If a man today says that he is a prophet or that he is spiritual—because he can speak in tongues—let him acknowledge that what Paul is saying here is a commandment of the Lord.

**Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.**

**Let all things be done decently and in order [[1 Cor. 14:39–40](#)].**

Here again we are encouraged to covet the best gift. Evidently teaching the Word of God is the best one, and I thank God for that.

“Let all things be done decently and in order.” This is a great principle. When I attended a tongues meeting in the South, I must confess that I could see neither rhyme nor reason in the entire service. It was all in confusion—not even an organized confusion, but *hopeless* confusion. Paul says that this is not the way things of God should be carried on.

This brings us to the conclusion of this section. If you have disagreed with me, I trust you will not fall out with me, but that you will search this Scripture. If I am wrong, pray for me.