

Re-evaluating tongues and prophecy today

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The issue of charismatic gifts remains important today. It is the cause of much friction among churches and there is a need for good biblical teaching and open dialogue among believers.

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None of us come to this topic from a neutral standpoint. We all have our past experience – good or bad – on these issues. We have all heard and read teaching from different sides of the debate. Some of us have been hurt by abuses of spiritual gifts; others were converted in a context where charismatic gifts were prevalent and they therefore form an important part of our spiritual background. Moreover we often tend to have arrived at our conclusions by judging the extremes of the opposite position that we currently hold. For example, someone holding a cessationist position (that miraculous gifts ceased with the apostles) might compare the worst of the charismatic movement with the best non-charismatic practice. Many cessationists judge the charismatic movement on the basis of negative experiences, but we cannot simply dismiss spiritual gifts because of past mistakes. That said, as Don Carson rightly points out,¹ if the charismatic movement is to gain more credibility it must exercise more biblical discernment. Here the work and example set by people like Terry Virgo and Wayne Grudem among many others is important. Fee, an outspoken Pentecostal scholar, laments that much of the exegesis of the book of Acts in charismatic circles is hermeneutically uncontrolled. Acts is not a paradigm for personal experience, but an account of the gospel's outward movement geographically, racially and above all theologically.² This insightful comment may explain some of the errors that have crept into some charismatic circles.

Whatever our background, we must all be prepared to be challenged, disturbed and changed by Scripture. Interestingly in 1 Corinthians, a key focus for the debate, Paul seems to be addressing people who practise different approaches to the gifts of tongues and prophecy and it seems that *both* the 'charismatics' and 'non-charismatics' needed to *adjust* their position.

Let me state at the outset that I do not believe it is possible to argue from the Bible for the cessationist position. Although advocates of the cessationist view raise many valuable points that are worth considering to do with the sufficiency of Scripture, the redemptive-historical nature of the book of Acts, the foundational role of the apostles and the unevenness of miracles in biblical (and post biblical) history, there seems to be no biblical

¹ D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12-14* (Paternoster, 1995) 172.

² Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 150.

warrant to argue for the ceasing of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit, including healing, tongues and prophecy. As Carson says: "The Holy Spirit does not just inaugurate the new age in Acts 2 and then disappear."³ The fruit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are to characterise the new age, not just its dawning.

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It is, therefore, a question of definition. But here we face a difficulty for it is hard to define the gifts in a precise manner since no definitions are given in the New Testament. The Bible is not a text book, but an account of the living God interacting with his world and it is therefore written into specific situations. Nearly all that we know about the charismatic gifts is taken from five different lists, in different orders containing over twenty gifts which do not seem to be exhaustive. For example, Wayne Grudem helpfully points out that the gifts 'message of knowledge' and 'message of wisdom' are named in 1 Corinthians 12:8 and that is the only reference we have to them, not only in Scripture but in any ancient literature of the time.⁴ Even if we know some of the results of the gifts and have some guidelines on how they should be used, it would be foolish to *categorically* define/identify these gifts and how they are to be used. All this calls for humility, but also excitement as we look to come to a greater understanding of what it means to be the body of Christ bringing glory to Jesus and shining out to a world living in darkness.

The definition of the gift of tongues

The first account in the Bible of people speaking in tongues is the day of Pentecost. The 120 or so believers who were gathered began to *speak known human languages* as the crowd from different parts of the world 'each heard them speak in his own language.' When we come to 1 Corinthians 12-14, however, the main doctrinal teaching on the gift, it is less clear whether Paul is talking exclusively about known human languages. This is pertinent to the debate since linguistic analyses of tapes of tongue utterances show that most of the time people are not speaking in real human languages. The patterns and structures that all known human languages require are simply not there.⁵

There do seem, however, to be hints in 1 Corinthians that Paul has in mind not only known human languages, but *a heavenly language*. First, there is a switch in the purpose of tongues from Acts (where tongues attest to the giving of the Spirit to a new people group in Acts 8, 10-11 and 19) and 1 Corinthians (where tongues are for the edification of Christians). This switch of purpose opens up the possibility of a switch of nature. Paul also uses a number of phrases in 1 Corinthians which fit with the concept of a

³ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 150

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (IVP, 1994), 1080.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of this debate see Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 79-88.

heavenly language. In 14:2 Paul says ‘anyone who speaks to men does not speak to men but to God, indeed no-one understands him, he utters mysteries in his spirit’ and later Paul says that when an outsider comes into the meeting and people are speaking in tongues the unbeliever will say ‘you are out of your mind’ (14:23) because these are not human languages that can be understood. In 13:1, even if he is speaking in hyperbole, he speaks of two types of tongues: ‘tongues of men and of angels.’ And in 12:10 Paul speaks of the gift of ‘speaking in *different kinds* of tongues,’ implying there is more than one type of tongue. Finally, when trying to define the gift of tongues, it is important to note that whereas prophecy is a word *from* God, tongues is a word *to* God (14:2-3). With all these considerations, I am inclined to adopt the definition given by Grudem: ‘*speaking in tongues is prayer or praise spoken to God in syllables not understood by the speaker.*’ The expression is broad enough,’ he continues, ‘to involve a wide variety of phenomena.’⁶

Grudem goes on to say that both are a language – they are not gibberish. Both convey conceptual thought and therefore can be interpreted with understanding. This is an important point when we come to judge the modern phenomenon. Carson says that a word study of the word ‘tongues’ shows that they always contain cognitive utterances even if they are enigmatic and incomprehensible.⁷ They are not nonsensical utterances because they need to be *interpreted* (14:5, 13, 27). For Paul there is a close connection between the content of the tongue and the intelligible result of interpretation so tongues must bear cognitive content. It seems clear then that for Paul tongues were a real language, a language that was cognitive, whether of men or of angels. Don Carson and Michael Green conclude:

Tongues are speech patterns sufficiently complex that they may bear all kinds of cognitive information in some coded array even though linguistically these patterns are not identifiable as human languages ... It appears then that tongues bear cognitive information even though they are not human languages – just as a computer program is a ‘language’ that conveys a great deal of information, even though it is not a ‘language’ that anyone actually speaks.⁸

Tongues are a “Holy Spirit Language” designed to enable people to worship God in greater depth and with greater release in their inner being – rather like the love language of a happily married couple, which may not mean anything, when the words are analysed, but which denotes the intimacy and trust of the people concerned.⁹

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The purpose and conduct of the gift of tongues

This brings us to the issue of how the gift of tongues should be exercised. First, the gift of tongues *is not a substitute for the proclamation of the gospel*. It is a common mistake for people to see 3,000 added on the day of Pentecost and believe tongues will bring conversions. But the disciples were ‘declaring the wonders of God’ (Acts 2:11) in languages which passers-by from other nations could understand. Luke says in 2:6 ‘when they heard this sound a crowd came together in bewilderment because each one heard them speaking in his own language.’ It seems that the *tongues attracted* the

⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1070, 1073

⁷ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 81.

⁸ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 86.

⁹ Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (Eerdmans, Rev. Ed., 2004), 162.

crowd, but it was *Peter's sermon and explanation* that converted the thousands. This fits with the description given above, that the 'gift of tongues is prayer or *praise spoken to God* in syllables not understood by the speaker.'

In 1 Corinthians Paul responds comprehensively to the abuse of the gift of tongues. He is clear that the gift of tongues is not to be used in public if there is no-one present to interpret it. (How we determine whether that person is present we are not told and this creates some issues when it comes to applying the gift of tongues today in corporate worship.) The reason is simple and clear. In 14:1-5 Paul says that the point of coming together is to edify each other. Edification is only possible if other people can understand what is being said. Since tongues are unintelligible speech they are unable to edify the church *unless* they are interpreted (in which case they seem to function in much the same way as prophecy).

Paul, however, is not against people speaking in tongues. Far from it: he says 'I would like every one of you to speak in tongues' (14:4) and 'I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.' It seems that tongues were a staple experience in Paul's private devotional life. Tongues are a form of prayer, a way of speaking to God (14:2, 28), a way of praying 'in the spirit' or 'by the spirit' which by-passes the mind (14:14-15). It is a means of communication with God to praise him with heartfelt gratitude (14:16), but which may also be used for supplication, petition and intercession. Paul says this 'edifies himself' (14:4). It might be objected that this can make tongues self-gratifying and does not fit with the normal idea that spiritual gifts are given 'for the common good' (12:7) and to build up the body (12:14ff). Yet, just like personal Bible study or prayer, personal edification can and should benefit the church as we in turn bless others. Jude 20, for example, commands self-edification.

Others have argued that speaking in tongues can be used to conduct spiritual warfare (since the phrase '*en pneumati*' used in 14:16 is also used in Ephesians 6:18 where it is commonly translated 'in the spirit') or for compensating our weaknesses and ignorance (Romans 8:26-27). This may be true, but both the Ephesians and Romans passages are talking to *all* believers and Paul is clear that the gift of tongues is not for all believers (1 Corinthians 12:7, 12, 14, 30).

So what of the conduct of the charismatic gift of tongues? Paul is clear about this and we ought to pay attention to what he commands.

Firstly, when someone prays (or sings, 1 Corinthians 14:15) in tongues, they do not lose self-control or become unaware of their surroundings or lapse into a frenzy. Rational thinking and conscious thought are not eclipsed. Paul talks about being able to start and stop at will (14:15-19, 27-28, 32). The experience may be emotional (bringing peace and joy) and spontaneous, but it is not ecstatic and uncontrolled. If there is no interpreter present then the person is to stay quiet and wait until they are on their own.

Secondly, in any church meeting there should be order and control. Paul therefore commands that two or three people at most should speak in tongues and in turn with an interpreter present (14:26-28).

To summarise: tongues contain cognitive information. They can be known human languages and they can be a heavenly language. They are to be used in public only when an interpreter is present, one at a time, two or three at most and there must be a high level of control and order.

To speak of my own experience for a moment, I myself speak in tongues in private. I have never spoken in tongues in public for interpretation. I find them useful and helpful in my relationship with Christ, mainly as a way of expressing joy in worship, but also for interceding for issues and people when I do not feel I know how. In terms of public meetings, I can only remember a few times when tongues have been spoken (or sung) and interpreted and the leader of the meeting has normally been very good at making sure we wait for an interpretation. When this has happened it has been hugely encouraging and I have felt a real sense of God's presence. What is less helpful is when everyone speaks in tongues all at once and out loud because this seems contrary to Paul's teaching.

The definition of the gift of prophecy

Defining prophecy is no easier than defining tongues. It may be helpful to say what it is not before we try to define what it is. Firstly, prophecy is not synonymous with powerful preaching or teaching. Teaching is the explanation and application of an inscripturated text whereas according in 1 Corinthians 14:30 prophecy seems to be a spontaneous revelation. Secondly, prophecy is not just a prediction of the future, although it can include this (Acts 11:28). It has more to do with God speaking to his people here and now, highlighting specific things they need to know or act upon. (In this respect it is similar to the role often played by Old Testament prophets of pointing people back to the covenant.) Thirdly, prophecy should not just be equated with personal guidance although again it may include that (Acts 13:1-3). Finally, New Testament prophecy does not have the same level of authority as the Old Testament Scriptures or the words of the New Testament apostles (1 Corinthians 14:29, 37).

So prophecy is spontaneous (1 Corinthians 14:30); it speaks to the church to strengthen, encourage, comfort and edify (14:3-4) and it is able to disclose hidden sin (14:25).

Aune describes it as 'a specific form of divination that consists of intelligible verbal message believed to originate with God and communicated through inspired human intermediaries'.¹⁰ Grudem defines it as 'the reception and subsequent transmission of spontaneous, divinely originated revelation.'¹¹ I prefer Saucy's definition of prophecy as '*inspired utterances that come through direct revelation from God*'¹² or, as Grudem elsewhere defines it, '*telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind*.'¹³ It seems to be a gift that God has given his church to speak to the needs of the people in a spontaneous and direct way. God may bring to mind or impress upon someone's consciousness certain words, ideas, pictures, visions or dreams (1 Corinthians 14:29-32 and Acts 2:17).

It is important to stress that New Testament prophets do not carry the same authority as people like Isaiah or Amos. When making a few refinements on Grudem's thesis on prophecy, Carson distinguishes¹⁴ between the Old Testament schools of prophets and the canonical prophets. He argues that Numbers 11:29-12:8 shows two types of prophets, firstly those who are charismatic and enigmatic (seeing dreams and visions), and secondly those who are Mosaic (who hear the very words of God). This suggests a precedent for two different levels of authority in

¹⁰ Cited in Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 93

¹¹ Cited in Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 94

¹² R. L. Saucy in Wayne Grudem (ed.) *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?: Four Views* (Zondervan/IVP, 1996), 127.

¹³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1049.

¹⁴ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 98.

the New Testament Church: the testimony of the apostles, which would gain canonical status, and the gift of prophecy given to many believers.

The purpose and conduct of the gift of prophecy

The gift of prophecy seems to have a wide variety of purposes: to strengthen, encourage, comfort and edify (1 Corinthians 14:3); to convict and expose (14:24-25); and to teach (14:31). It seems that it was also used for direction for ministry (Acts 13:1-3); predicting the future (Acts 11:28); and identifying or imparting spiritual gifts (1 Timothy 4:14).

In terms of boundaries for practising the gift, the first and foremost boundary Paul lays down, which applies to all spiritual gifts, is that anyone 'speaking by the Spirit of God' speaks under the lordship of Jesus (1 Corinthians 12:3) and therefore what is uttered must be in harmony with canonical revelation (14:29, 37). To put it more positively, Lloyd Jones used to say 'the Bible was not given to replace direct and immediate revelation from God; it was given to correct abuses.'¹⁵

Secondly, what is said must be judged and evaluated carefully by the community of believers (14:29). Presumably in practice this means the leader of the meeting oversees what is being said. For some people this is a problem because they cannot believe that something that God has said needs to be evaluated. How could it be fallible? However it seems clear that there is a difference in the biblical revelation which God superintended at every level to ensure it is infallible and the gift of prophecy which needs to be evaluated (Acts 20:22; 21:11, 31-36; 22:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22). Implicit in this is the conclusion that 'a prophet who treated his prophecy as so immediate and direct and untarnished a product of divine inspiration that it shouldn't be questioned is not Pauline.'

Thirdly, what is said must edify the church (1 Corinthians 14:3-4).

Fourthly, as with the practice of the gift of tongues, Paul says that many will be able to prophesy, but not all and there must be order and control (14:29-33). Two or three prophets should speak one at a time as this reflects our God of peace not disorder. Carson, when speaking about the order and control of tongues and prophecy in public worship, says 'our God is a thinking and speaking God and if we will know him we must learn to think his thoughts after him. The church should be a place of intelligibility.'

Again, to speak personally, I sometimes have an urge to read a Scripture, to say something that has come to mind while preaching or to pray something specific that seems appropriate and very often it is those words that afterwards people say have helped them. There have also been a number of times when I have felt almost overwhelmed or burdened to say something specific or to pray for someone in a specific way. Is this prophecy as Paul meant it? It would seem to fit all the criteria!

Despite these positive examples, I am unsure whether a lot of what I have experienced in charismatic circles can really be classed as biblical prophecy in action.

I also attend a church in which words are given from the front, usually one or two a service. Recently, for example, a lady came to the front, spoke to

¹⁵ R. T. Kendall, *The Anointing* (Hodder, 1998), 97.

the leader of the meeting about what she was going to say and then very calmly and succinctly said: “I just feel God might be saying ...”. She went on to give a number of examples of people not finding satisfaction in God. She referenced John 6 and spoke of Jesus being the bread of life. The person leading the meeting invited us to sing a song in response, praising God that ‘he is enough.’ This seems to fit the practice outlined by Paul, it did touch a number of people and it did lead our worship in a particular God-centred direction. There are other stories of preachers saying something that came into their mind as they were preaching, describing specific details which perfectly summed up someone’s life and this led that person to repentance.

Despite these positive examples, I am unsure whether a lot of what I have experienced in charismatic circles can really be classed as biblical prophecy in action. First, as Packer points out (presumably speaking from his experience), a lot of prophecies are ‘as much stereotyped, vague and uninformative as they are spontaneous, fluent and confident.’¹⁶ Although I think Carson is too forceful his point has a measure of validity when he says ‘thoughtless justification of tongue utterances, prophecies and visions that are often extraordinarily trite, sometimes heretical, rarely examined, only occasionally controlled and commonly pastorally stupid. Calling an inanity a prophecy does not stop it being an inanity!’¹⁷

Secondly, a number of people have abused the gift and seen it as a chance to exercise power over someone else’s life. Instead of coming from a position of humility where what is said is to be weighed and thought through, they have come with an almost Old Testament prophet approach of ‘thus says the Lord.’ This has been damaging in a number of lives and has left people hurt, disillusioned and far from God.

Dangers surrounding the gifts of tongues and prophecy

Second blessing and spiritual elitism

There is a school of thought that teaches there is a ‘one-off’ endowment of the Holy Spirit subsequent to conversion which is expected of all believers. It is often called ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’ or ‘second blessing’. Some go so far as to say that the gift of tongues is the sign of being truly filled with the Spirit. But when the book of Acts describes believers receiving the Spirit and speaking in tongues, it describes a *new group of believers* (Acts 2, 8, 10-11 and 19). The gift of tongues comes upon *a group of people who did not ask for it*. These passages are not describing what is normative in the life of a believer, but key moments in the movement of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, demonstrating that the new age of the Spirit is open to all people groups.

Even those who do not advocate the second blessing position have at times been guilty of a spiritual elitism due to their endowment of the Spirit. This seems to be the very issue that Paul is dealing with in Corinth. At the heart of the three chapters he devotes to spiritual gifts is the call to ‘the most excellent way’ of love.

People can easily start measuring their personal value by their gifting (1 Corinthians 4:7) whereas spiritual gifts were given for ministry. They are gifts of *grace*. They are not necessarily related to Christian maturity (as the immature church at Corinth shows). It is even recorded that non-believers used spiritual gifts (Matt 7.22-23).

¹⁶ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 87.

¹⁷ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 172.

The New Testament is unequivocal in asserting that the Holy Spirit is for all believers who put their trust in the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-28 and Romans 8:9) and nowhere are gifts linked to a person's spiritual life (Romans 6-8, Ephesians 5-6, Colossians 3-4).

Nevertheless, we do have positive commands that we need to obey with care. Firstly, Galatians 5:16, 25 tells us to 'walk by the Spirit' and, secondly, Ephesians 5:18 tells us to 'be filled with the Spirit'. Both of these are present tense commands and are to do with continual growth, renewal and filling of the Spirit as we seek to become more like Jesus.

Tongues as a sign for unbelievers

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul has been arguing that tongues should not be used in the public arena because they are unintelligible. In 1 Corinthians 14:22 he says 'tongues then are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however is for believers, not for unbelievers.' But he follows this up by warning against the public use of tongues precisely because unbelieving visitors will find their use unintelligible and conclude '*you are out of your mind*' (14:23). In what sense, then, are tongues a sign of unbelievers if Paul warns against their public use because of the potential for misunderstanding by unbelievers?

The answer is found in Paul's quotation from Isaiah 28:11 (which alludes to Deuteronomy 28:49). Here God is going to send the Assyrians, people of a foreign language who the Israelites will not understand, against his people because of their rebellion. Being ruled over by a people whose language you cannot understand means God has come in judgment, handing his people over to foreign powers. If an outsider comes into the assembly of the church and hears unintelligible speech, they will be driven away. The church in Corinth would have given them 'a sign' that leads to judgment.

So un-interpreted tongues should not be permitted in church gatherings for in doing so believers run the risk of communicating a sign of judgment to others that will only drive them away. This is born out in experience. A friend of mine had been enjoying an Alpha Course and had started thinking about the claims of Christ. However, on the 'the Holy Spirit weekend' people started speaking in tongues without any interpretation or order and, in his own words, 'it got a bit wacky'. As a result he was put off from finding out more and has generally been closed in any conversations we have had, citing this previous experience as the reason why. The experience turned him away from Christ when he was previously being drawn in. If only we would heed Paul's words!

When it comes to guidance, the emphasis should not be turning to prophecy, but to Scripture. As Psalm 119:105 says: 'your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.' Here in God's word we find the source of God's direction and will.

Prophecy and personal guidance

God is a personal God who listens to our prayers and knows our needs. We should, therefore, be encouraged to listen for the voice of God's guidance with an open and humble heart. John Piper however, helpfully highlights a trait that is common among many. Piper says that one should

avoid looking too quickly or depending on the gift of prophecy for making routine daily decisions in life.¹⁸ He lists a number of passages where Paul talks not about seeking revelation, but reckoning with our minds (Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 6:5, 16:14; Philippians 1:9; Colossians 1:9). Piper is not dismissing the possibility of personal guidance, but that the norm in the New Testament is the formation of a Christian mind that is able to make godly decisions about all areas of life. In the Old Testament the book of Proverbs functions in a similar way, teaching us to live a wise life. We are to use our brains, saturated in God's word and therefore in tune with God's general will, so that we can make wise decisions. When it comes to guidance, the emphasis should not be turning to prophecy, but to Scripture. As Psalm 119:105 says: 'your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.' Here in God's word we find the source of God's direction and will.

A proper emphasis

Perhaps the most crucial problem that can arise with tongues and prophecy is that of a wrong emphasis in theology and practice. Indeed, this seems to be the *heart* of the issue in the church in Corinth. This may manifest itself in a number of ways, but often people long for a 'spiritual experience' and are excited by the spiritual gifts in a way that is disproportionate and unhealthy. People may seek the gifts rather than the Giver. This in turn leads to other abuses: using prophecy to manipulate people or situations, an increasing triteness in what is said, elitism, inferiority and disorder. Paul, and indeed the whole Bible, balance the objective and the subjective, the emotional and the intellectual, God's eternal word given for all time and God's spontaneous word given into a situation.

The issue Paul is dealing with in 1 Corinthians is not whether spiritual gifts exist, but a wrong emphasis that the church has placed on them. In the Pastoral Epistles, with their focus on handing over of the leadership of the churches to those who were not of the original apostles, the emphasis is on teaching, rebuking and commanding from Scripture (1 Timothy 4:11, 13, 16; 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:2-3; 3:14-17; 4:2; Titus 1.9). It is not that spiritual gifts are no longer needed or are unimportant just because they are not really mentioned (the Lord's Supper is not mentioned either). But Paul prepares Timothy for his death by directing him to the Scriptures rather than to prophecy. The gifts are not pre-eminent. What is pre-eminent is the preaching of the word, loving the poor, sharing the good news of Christ and building up the body of believers in the various ways God has ordained (including spiritual gifts). Of course we should be open and expectant, but spiritual gifts are not central as applying the truths of Scripture to our lives and loving acts of service (1 Corinthians 13). We should not give tongues or prophecy an emphasis the Bible does not give. Rather we should create an atmosphere where the word of God is foundational and the person and work of Christ is the focus.

Are we dead?

Such are some of the abuses of charismatic gifts. But there are dangers on the other side as well. What is clear from the Corinthians' correspondence is that the worship at Corinth was alive, interactive and passionate. It was a church that had the full range of spiritual gifts on show. Paul rebukes their practice of the gifts, but he is careful not to do so in a way that will stifle their passion or imply that spiritual gifts are unimportant. In fact Paul encourages them to be eager and zealous for more: 'eagerly desire spiritual gifts especially the gift of prophecy' (1 Corinthians 14:1) and 'I wish everyone of you could speak in tongues but I would rather you prophesy'

¹⁸ Cited by C. Samuel Storms in Wayne Grudem (ed.) *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, 221.

(14:5). ‘When you come together *everyone* has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.’ (14:26). J. I. Packer says churches may well be ‘orderly and therefore asleep, maybe even the sleep of death. Order in a cemetery is no great thing!’¹⁹ Much of our Christianity is merely cerebral, lacking emotion and passion. Maybe the gift of tongues, which by-passes the mind and therefore fights against intellectualism, is the very gift we need. If we are Bible-believing Christians who seek to obey Scripture, why do we fall short of Paul’s command to eagerly desire spiritual gifts? We are far from the situation in Corinth and I wonder whether Paul would write a letter to us to rebuke us for being boring, dead and lacking God’s imminent presence.

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Some people will shout, sing and dance because of the passion they feel watching football on a Saturday afternoon. Those same people then walk into their church service the next day and can expect nothing but a boring, solemn and intellectual engagement with the God who gave all those footballers their talent. The One who created the pleasures we enjoy deserves more than a song sung in a monotone voice. Don Carson says:

Even if the exegesis that produces the theology of second blessing is unsound, the emphasis and general point is very sound. Many non-charismatics have run away because they are reacting or are scarred and they no longer have a desire for a greater pursuit of the Lord or of profound spiritual experience ... Of course it is a danger to seek gifts for gifts’ sake or to assume greater maturity with certain gifts and certainly it is a travesty when people pursue a second blessing attested by tongues. But equally dangerous is to not pant after God at all and to be satisfied with a merely creedal Christianity that is kosher but compliant, orthodox but ossified, sound but soundly asleep.²⁰

Martyn Lloyd Jones often used to say, it is easy to be ‘perfectly orthodox and perfectly useless.’²¹ Churches should be a dynamic interplay of sharing, giving and taking, not one speaker and a congregation of listeners. Of course 1 Corinthians is not the whole picture and there should be aspects of corporate worship characterised both by (1) a great deal of spontaneity, Spirit-led sharing and mutual edification and also (2) solemnity, formal reading and explication of the Scriptures already given, declaration of apostolic truth and corporate prayers and singing. Our pattern of church life should reflect both. Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 14 is not an exhaustive list of principles for corporate worship but an explanation of how ‘the unleashed power of the Holy Spirit characteristic of this new age must be exercised in a framework of order, intelligibility, appropriateness, seemliness, dignity, peace, for that is the nature of the God whom we worship.’²² Saucy summarises the problem well: ‘the problem or danger of

¹⁹ Cited by Storms in Grudem (ed.), *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, 223.

²⁰ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 160.

²¹ Kendall, *The Anointing*, 3.

²² Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 136.

holding the position which is sometimes called “open but cautious” is that while avowing openness to God’s miraculous working, one might in reality be closed. Reduced expectation ends up with no expectation at all.²³

Wayne Grudem provides the following advice for those wanting to take up the challenge of eagerly desiring spiritual gifts more than we do already.²⁴ Pray for wisdom to know how and when and to proceed. Teach on the subject. Proceed slowly so that you avoid frightening and alienating people (1 Peter 5.3). Encourage what already exists – things such as Spirit-led prayer, spontaneous Scripture readings and promptings. Provide smaller, less formal, opportunities for contributions (within guidelines). If the use of tongues and prophecy become common place, the church should place even more emphasis on the vastly superior value of Scripture as the source to which Christians can always go to hear the voice of the living God. Prophecy is valuable, but Scripture is the *only* place we hear God’s very words, even today. Our hope, expectation and greatest joy should be in God himself as he speaks to us through the Bible. There we have the treasure of infinite worth – the actual words of our Creator speaking to us in a language we can understand.

Conclusion

Let us be careful not to become too prescriptive of what the gifts are. Let us give them the emphasis they are due – no more and no less. Let us stay united and open to being challenged and changed. Let us think about how we can perform acts of loving service and how we can tell a needy world that we have a great God who loves them.

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Northern Training Institute

The Northern Training Institute provides an affordable, Bible college-level programme of study that enables students to integrate theological training with involvement in ministry through residential weeks, seminar days and guided reading. The Institute also promotes theological reflection on the practice of mission and ministry.

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²³ Saucy in Grudem (ed.), *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today?*, 145.

²⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1060