

Study 21. 1 Cor 14:1-26

Big idea: speaking in tongues is good but prophecy is better

Introduction

If you could instantly learn any language to a native speaker level what would it be and why?

Observation and interpretation

Look up the following passages and try to work out what we can say for sure about what "speaking in tongues" and "prophecy" involves:

	Speaking in tongues	Prophecy
Who you are speaking to?	1 Cor 14:2	1 Cor 14:3
Who is edified?	1 Cor 14:4	1 Cor 14:4
Is the language intelligible to others?	1 Cor 14:9-12, 14, 16	1 Cor 14:19
What happens to unbelievers when they hear it?	1 Cor 14:23	1 Cor 14:24-25

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-5

- Why is the one who prophesies greater than the one who speaks in tongues?
- If everyone has their own gift, and not everyone is a prophet (1 Corinthians 12:29) then why does Paul suggest that we eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit "especially prophecy" (14:1)?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6-12

- Why does Paul pick these metaphors to explain how prophecy is superior to tongues? What is the point he's trying to drive home?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:13-19

- Is there anything wrong with speaking in tongues?
- Under what circumstances could speaking in tongues be useful in church?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:20-25

- Why is speaking in tongues a "sign" to unbelievers? Is it a positive sign or a negative sign?
- How do you think prophecy causes outsiders to be "convicted of sin" and to "fall down and worship God" (14:25)?

Prophecy

Paul uses "Prophecy" here as a broad term for speech directed towards the congregation about them and God on a particular occasion or with a particular focus. Like the reading of Scripture or the teaching of doctrine it is communication from God, but it is more tailored to the specific situation of the hearers.

- It can take the form of challenge, comfort, judgment, consolation - whatever is needed to build up the hearers.
- It doesn't have to be spontaneous, in fact it seems like Paul imagines people receiving a prophetic word at home, stewing on it a while, and then bringing it before the congregation to be weighed (1 Cor 14:26-40).
- It's not necessarily about predicting the future. In the Old Testament it was partly about warning people about what is to come, but also about giving God's commentary on human affairs - the point is how to live in light of what's to come, not to feel superior because you know who is going to win the Grand Final.
- Old Testament "big P Prophets" were rare, and were commissioned by God (Jeremiah 1:4-10) and if they got their prediction wrong they would be put to death as a false prophet. In New Testament land we don't have big P Prophets, we have Jesus (Heb 1:1). The gift of prophecy continues, but you are less likely to be writing new books of the Bible at this stage in God's salvation history.
- Some people have a particular gift of prophecy, but everyone has the Spirit and so is able to be used by God to deliver his message (See Joel 2:28-32). So the most basic level - when you tell your friend they probably should take Jesus seriously and they do, then you have been used by God to communicate God's most urgent message to their situation.
- The final thing that's worth saying about prophecy is that it comes in different shapes and sizes. There are hopefully elements of prophecy in our preaching at Barneys, at least in some sermons, but it can also be delivered one on one or in a small group. I think songs can have elements of prophecy in them - most great songwriters I know

see their job as dwelling on scriptures in prayer in order to discern what God wants his people to sing about.

Tongues

It's hard to say exactly what "Speaking in Tongues" means in this passage, because that same expression is used in different ways in different parts of the Bible. Some possibilities are:

1. *Natural human language.* "speaking in tongues" is a normal Biblical way of describing someone who is speaking in a human language (e.g. "people from every tribe and language (Greek: *glossa*, meaning tongue) and people and nation" Rev 5:9). Here, however, it seems like the language is not a normal human language which people in the church can learn.
2. *Natural human language supernaturally given.* In Acts 2 people are able to speak in languages they don't know and be understood by people from other nations. It is not quite clear, however, whether this is a supernatural gift of learning language really fast, or a supernatural gift of hearing the same words in your own language (i.e. is the miracle on the transmitting or the receiving end?)
3. *Divine language.* Sometimes it seems like the New Testament is talking about an angelic or divine language which people with the Spirit can use to communicate with God.
4. *Wordless communication.* It could be that what is being communicated is not actually an intelligible language at all, but some sort of Spirit-powered connection with God.

If we assume that a different person is given the gift of interpretation (14:5, 14:13), and that the person speaking is not actually able to translate the prayer into their own native language (which perhaps 1 Cor 14:14 hints at) then the most likely candidate is somewhere between the third and fourth option.

Application / Implications

- Should we celebrate the gift of tongues more in our life as a church?
- We tend to think of the sermon as being the main way in which God's word is brought to bear on our community. But this seems to suggest that, while there are different gifts for different people, we should all be seeking to cultivate prophetic gifts in our community. What opportunities could we all take to build up the church with our speech?
- Apart from the sermon, how could we include opportunity for different people in our community to exercise prophetic gifts in our services?

Prayer ideas

- Pray for our community, that we might be a place where people encounter the living God!