

THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

UNDERSTANDING ITS ROLE FOR THE MODERN CHURCH

I. UNDERSTANDING THE GIFT PROPHECY

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace (χάρις – charis) of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift (χάρισμα – charisma/charismata) as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor 1:4–9).¹

- A. A conversation around the famous chapters of 1 Cor 12–15 concerning faith, hope and love begins here in Paul’s purpose statement for the letter.
- B. Many Christians today tend to control or domesticate their faith because they want to avoid anything that could potentially be troublesome. Put simply, according to Gordon D. Fee, Paul is here communicating that “the problem lies not in their gifts, but in their attitude toward these gifts.”²

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift (1 Cor 4:7)?

- C. The subject of God’s grace and spiritual gifts are deeply intertwined in the letters of Paul (e.g., Rom 12:6 where Christians are given different spiritual gifts (*charismata*) according to the grace (*charisma*) that is given to them). Consequently, one could say there is a manifestation of differing *graces* (gifts) of God’s *grace*.³

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all scripture citations come from the New Revised Standard Version.

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 36; cf. P. T. O’Brien, who states, “A more adequate explanation for such a thrust as God’s gracious activity can be discovered from the situation that prompted the writing of the letter.... At the same time the Corinthians had forgotten that what they had received were ‘gifts’ (note the biting words of 4:7, ‘What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?’), sovereignly distributed by the Holy Spirit (12:4–11, esp. v. 11) and that their purpose was ‘for the common good’ (12:7), or that the church may be edified (14:5)” (*Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* [Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1977], 114).

³ For those interested, the subject of grace was normal in the ancient Mediterranean world. The first-century philosopher Seneca (i.e., a contemporary of Paul) speaks of the three Graces or goddesses in the following manner: “Some writers think that there is one who bestows a benefit, one who receives it, and a third who returns it; others say that they represent the three sorts of benefactors, those who bestow, those who repay, and those who both receive and repay them... What is the meaning of this dance of sisters in a circle, hand in hand? It means that the course of a benefit is from hand to hand, back to the giver; that the beauty of the whole chain is lost if a single link fails, and that it is fairest when it proceeds in unbroken regular order... Their faces are cheerful, as those of men who give or receive benefits are wont to be. They are young, because the memory of benefits ought not to grow old. They are virgins, because benefits are pure and untainted, and held holy by all; in benefits there should be no strict or binding conditions, therefore the Graces wear loose flowing tunics, which are transparent, because benefits love to be seen” (*Ben.* 1.3).

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- D. The manifestation of God’s grace in the life of the believer is eschatological, apocalyptic, and/or looks to the consummation of his grand plan. Spiritual gifts are the means (although not the *only* means) by which we wait for the final revelation of Jesus in his second coming.

II. 1 CORINTHIANS 12–15: FAITH, HOPE & LOVE

- A. The “love chapter” of 1 Cor 13 is set in the context of two exhortations to desire spiritual gifts.

But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way (1 Cor 12:31).

Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy (1 Cor 14:1).

- B. *The life of the believer is a life that is meant to cooperate with God’s grace.* Part of this cooperation includes the cultivation of the spirit of prophecy. Paul articulates in these chapters that to operate in spiritual gifts is to both as act of service and worship. We still await the “perfect” (13:8–13), but as we wait, we are called to be proactive until the fullness arrives—the bodily resurrection of the saints (15:1–58).

- C. Chapter 14 is the primary focus of this letter. In fact, 12:1–15:58 forms the principal purpose for Paul’s writing. The outworking of tongues and prophecy in the Corinthian community was very important to Paul; it just needed to be done properly. In 14:1–25 there is a contrast between unintelligible inspired speech (the gift of tongues) and intelligible inspired speech (the gift of prophecy). Paul directs the Church toward the significance of having prophecy (intelligible encouragement) in their midst.⁴ The reason for this is twofold:

1. For the edification of believers (14:1–19)
2. For the conversion of unbelievers (14:20–25)

- D. Functioning in the prophetic is like putting a sail up in a boat on a lake during a calm day. When it seems there is no breeze, the sail catches even the gentlest wind that just barely moves the boat. However, it does move! A similar dynamic occurs when we ask the Lord what he is doing. We may not see the boat move significantly, but it still moves.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing (1 Cor 13:1–3).⁵

⁴ 14:18–19, 23, and 26 reference the corporate nature and purpose of the gift of prophecy. Paul is singling out tongues due to the abusing of this gift, which resulted in disorder and confusion (cf. 14:12, 23, 33, 40).

⁵ Cf. *Testament of Job* 48–50 for a possible Jewish background to tongues as being the “tongues of angels.”

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- E. The value and supremacy of spiritual gifts can only be understood when it is set in context with the subjects of love and the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom 14:10–12; 1 Cor 3:10–15; 2 Cor 5:10).
- F. Paul has just declared the great value of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Cor 12 (esp. vv. 7–11). If we speak in the tongues of men (Acts 2:3–11) or angels people will give you great honor. However, it will be evaluated at the Judgment Seat of Christ as nothing more than a clanging cymbal. If we move mountains by faith, give all our money to help the poor or even embrace the death of a martyr without love, it leaves us without any reward or profit at the Judgment Seat of Christ.
- G. Understanding the three-fold love of God:
1. *Love from God:* how God feels about us (revelation of God’s heart (Father/Bridegroom). This is foundational to God’s invitation for us to walk in intimacy with Him.
 2. *Love for God:* we love God in response to understanding his love for us.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:37–40).
 3. *Love for others:* as we love God we overflow in love for others (believers/unbelievers). Thus, in context to 1 Cor 12–15, prophecy and the gifts of the Spirit exist for the purpose of loving God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

Love never ends....⁹ For we know only in part and we prophesy only in part....¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part....¹³ And now faith, hope, love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (1 Cor 13:8-13).
- H. In 1 Cor 13:8-13, Paul’s primary point is to establish the permanence and superiority of love over the goodness of operating in God’s power by faith. That said, there are three principles established by Paul in these verses that are of great importance.
1. First, love that never fails is what defines our success before God (v. 8). No investment of love is forgotten, wasted, or lost in God’s sight.

For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints (Heb 6:10).
 2. Second, it takes love to prophesy because we only prophesy in part or by faint (dim) impressions (vv. 9–12). The mirror in the ancient world was a dim reflection (usually polished metal). When operating in the gifts of the Spirit, we usually only receive a part or a fragment of knowledge from the Spirit. This process of pursuing to operate in power by faith (impressions) humbles us.

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3. Third, love is the greatest of the three great realities in our relationship with Jesus (faith, hope and love). They define what it means to be filled with the Spirit or to walk in the Spirit.

Now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13:13). ^{NKJV}

- I. ***Faith***: this is the required response (agreement with God’s Word and Spirit) in our partnership with God that results spiritual strength. It includes the living expectation of the supernatural that calls the future into the present (1:7). Our faith grows as we understand who we are in Christ and the authority we have in Christ. It results in the breakthrough of God’s power for our heart, body, ministry and the release of his favor on circumstances (finances, open doors for harvest/personal) and removal of Satan’s resistance.

- J. ***Hope***: this is the embracing of God’s promises concerning the future of humanity and the earth; the fullness of which is seen in our resurrection, of which Jesus was the first fruit.

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain (1 Cor 15:13–14).

- K. ***Love***: this is intimacy with God and striving to conform to the character he has set before us (e.g., the Sermon on the Mount). Love is the greatest of these three because it continues and expresses God’s eternal character (it does not pass away like the gifts; 13:8). He who loves most, wins and succeeds before God – “Did you learn to love?”

- L. Faith is the way to release the gifts of the Spirit. Love is the purpose of them. Faith is how the gifts function. Love is why they function. The hope message stabilizes us (keeps us focused and in peace without fear). We need to be strong in faith, anchored in hope and walk in love.

III. TO BUILD UP, ENCOURAGE AND CONSOLE

...those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church (1 Cor 14:3–4).

- A. The words “upbuilding” (*ukodomeo* – οικοδομέω), “encouragement” (*paraklasis* – παράκλησις), and “consolation/comfort” (*paramuthia* – παραμυθία) give the parameters for the intent of prophecy. Interestingly, there is nothing here about a prophetic utterance being connected to something in the future (although prophecy can operate this way). In fact, Paul refers to prophecy as being that which strengthens believers in their present situations.

- B. As mentioned in 1 Cor 8:1, it is love that builds up. Now, in this chapter, the preceding section on love (13:1–13) is in focus as Paul emphasizes the purpose of prophecy as following the same contours of 8:1—its objective is the upbuilding of the Church.