

How is prophecy to be used in the church?

- 1 Corinthians 14:26-40
- We continue our discussion about prophecy today for one final sermon. Next week, Scott Hahn will preach here, while Micah and I will preach in two churches in Moldova. The following week, Jan. 28, Lord willing I will begin to take us all through the book of Amos, who was a prophet in the 8th century BC who had something important to say to Israel, and I believe, to the church today.
- As we look again at prophecy, remember the definition we borrowed from Wayne Grudem: 'It should be defined not as 'predicting the future,' nor as 'proclaiming a word from the Lord,' nor as 'powerful preaching' –but rather as *telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.*' We saw last week that Paul opened this section on prophecy with this: "pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy." Church, desire to walk in the gifts of the spirit, and especially desire that God may allow you to prophesy. Today we see that he ends this teaching on spiritual gifts, and particularly on tongues and prophecy with this: "But all things should be done decently and in order." Here's where the church sometimes goes off the rails, or into the ditch, if you will, and there is a ditch on either side. On the one side is the church that says, "We are not getting within 100 feet of prophecy or tongues or miracles or healing. There's too much abuse and excess and emotional display, and it has harmed the church, and we are just going to not have anything to do with all of that." Some churches believe these gifts passed away when the Bible was completely written, and we spoke to that issue last week. Paul says the gifts will pass away "when the perfect comes," and we believe the perfect refers to the next age, when Christ returns and all is restored. Other churches, like ours, believe those gifts are for today, but we tend to de-emphasize them because they can indeed get messy and cause division, so we sometimes have two wheels in the ditch and the other two on the road. But Paul says, "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy." It's hard to ignore!
- The ditch on the other side is one that many, not all, charismatic churches find themselves in, where they say, "Unless we have 3 people prophesy and at least two messages in tongues, we didn't have CHURCH today!" In these churches, sometimes the regulations that the Bible gives us for prophecy are set aside, and that opens the door for excess or abuse or worse: false teaching and even heresy. Paul said, "But all things should be done decently and in order." And earlier, in verse 33, "For God is not a God of confusion, but of peace." Let's look at some guidelines from Scripture that we must stand squarely on, if we are to earnestly desire to prophesy.
- **First, who may prophesy? Acts 2:17** On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit came down and filled the church and they began to speak in other tongues, "as the Spirit gave them utterance." Peter preached after this in response to the chatter in town that the church people were drunk. Peter quoted from the prophet Joel who said in the last days, "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." John Piper writes, "So here is a statement of what the last days (our days!) will be like. It appears that prophecy will not be so much an office, but a widespread experience of men and women."
- Sons and daughters may prophesy. Men and women. We see that clearly at Pentecost, and Paul says it again in 1 Cor. 11:4 when he writes, "every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head." (Let's not get into head coverings today, but the context of that teaching by Paul has to do with wives being under their husband's authority when they speak in church, just as men are to be under Christ's authority when they speak in church.) But women may prophesy, and not just married women! In Acts 21:9 we are told that Philip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.
- **Second, how many may prophesy?** 1 Corinthians 14:29, "Let two or three prophets speak." Paul then says in verse 31, "For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and be

encouraged.” If we put those two thoughts together, here’s what I believe Paul is saying. First, that this is not referred to as an office but a gift. Not a noun, but a verb. Each can prophesy. But Paul asked in 1 Cor. 12, “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?” and the answer was clearly, no. So it seems to me that Paul is saying there is nothing to prohibit any of you who are born again from prophesying except the decision of the Holy Spirit. Paul said of us in Romans 12:6, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...” And in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul lists a lot of spiritual gifts and then writes, “All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as He wills.” (1 Cor. 12:11) So, each of us may prophesy, if the Spirit enables us to do so.

- Second, Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:29, “two or three may prophesy.” Remember we talked last week about the difference between prophecy and teaching or preaching. Teaching and preaching is what God primarily uses to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. The apostles in Acts 6 did not say, “It is not right that we should give up prophesying to serve tables.” No, they said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” Paul did not encourage Timothy to prophesy to the church. Instead, he said, “Preach the Word; be ready in season and out of season.” **Look at 2 Timothy 4:13-16.** Why is teaching and preaching so important to the life of the church? Because as the psalmist said, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” – Ps 119:105 So, what is Paul saying? That when we come together, two or three may prophesy, but the Bible must be taught by someone who has been called and set aside to rightly divide the Word of truth.
- **Third, how must we listen to those who prophesy?**
- Understand the limitations of prophecy. Prophecy does not have final, decisive authority, like Scripture does. Its purpose is to edify, encourage, and build up the church. It’s purpose is not to issue a command. Paul defines the difference between prophecy and the commands of Scripture in **verse 37**. Paul writes Scripture with the authority of God to those in the church who would speak with a prophetic utterance: he says, listen to the commands I give you from the Lord! What are those commands?
- First, Prophecy is to be weighed, verse 29. The word there usually means that we examine carefully, or even that we look at something with mild skepticism. This is interesting, because Paul is not saying to judge the person who spoke, as we would look at the fruits of a false prophet. But we are to simply weigh what is said. We are to listen to what is being said and take what we believe is good about it, consistent with Scripture, and we are to discard the rest! This confirms what we said last week, that prophecy today is not equal with Scripture as it was when Isaiah or Joel said, “Thus says the Lord.” No follower of God was allowed to accept what they wanted to from the true Old Testament prophets and discard the rest. And if a man claimed to be a prophet and spoke words that did not come from God, he was put to death! We will not need to do that, here. We will do as Paul told the church in Thessalonica: “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.” (1 Thess. 5:20-21) There it is: don’t look down on those who prophesy, even if you listen with a touch of skepticism. But eat the meat and spit out the bone. By the way, we must do that with preaching here on Sunday morning and teaching at home group or wherever you have Bible studies. The Berean Christians were praised because, “They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things (Paul and Silas preached) were so.” (Acts 17:11) Hold up what is said to the measure of the Word and if it is not accurate, point the preacher or the teacher back to the word of truth. And when a word of prophecy is spoken, we are to weigh it for biblical accuracy.
- By the way, the reference here to women not being allowed to speak in church must be understood in its context. If Paul were not allowing women to speak at any time, then why would he say in chapter 11 that they can pray or prophesy? No, the context here has to do with weighing the prophets. That is the job of men, and specifically the job of the elders. Wayne Grudem writes,

“Paul is simply prohibiting women from the authoritative task of judging prophecies in the assembled church.” Taken alongside 1 Timothy 2:12, “I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet,” we see that Paul is maintaining the apostolic teaching that is unassailable in the New Testament; that is, the church is to be led and governed and taught by men. And as we have said many times, that begs the question, “can God bless a church that is led and taught by women?” Of course, He can. God often blesses His people in spite of our choosing to do things differently than what is clearly prescribed in His Word. But the norm that He has established, and that we should want to follow, is that men are to exercise leadership in the home, and in the church.

- **Final thoughts.**
- Let’s close with these three goals as a church as we move forward.
- First, let’s walk with purpose with regard to the spiritual gifts. Do you regularly pray that God will give you His gifts to serve the church and exalt Christ? And if you know what your gift is, are you using that gift in proportion to your faith, as Paul says in Romans 12? And as Scripture commands, ask the Lord to allow you to prophesy. We don’t need to be afraid of this, especially if we understand that it is a grace of God given to build up His church and glorify His name. We also know that we are in a safe place here, with 8 men who are called by God to protect the flock from error. And many more men who can also stand as biblical warriors and fight for this church.
- Second, let’s walk in humility with regard to the spiritual gifts. As CS Lewis said, “True humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less.” There is much we don’t understand, and none of us needs to pretend that we do. At the same time, humility means submitting myself to the Lord to use me as He wills. If I am brash and arrogant with the gifts, I am not humble. If I am fearful to use the gifts, I am not humble. In both cases, I need to think of myself less.
- Third, let’s walk in love with regard to the spiritual gifts. As Paul said in the love chapter, as we call it, if I speak in tongues, and have prophetic powers, and have amazing knowledge, and have all faith so as to even remove mountains, “but have not love, I am nothing.” The world knows we are Christians by our love. It is the single most important grace of God that we should strive for. As Paul says, what abides now is “faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of these, is love.” (1 Cor. 13:13)
- **Prayer**