

*The Bible gives reasonable instructions why Christians, when they gather together, should speak edifying and intelligible words to each other rather than speaking with unfamiliar tongues (unless interpretation is provided). Thus Christians use their spiritual gifts to prophesy to believers and even inquiring outsiders.*

**Introduction** – I used to think my church was special.

## **I. Similar Spiritual Gifts**

### **A. Speaking in tongues (v. 2)**

1. Speaking in free vocalized utterances? Testimonies of Pentecostal/Charismatic believers. Ever since the modern Pentecostal movement started with a revival in 1906, it has almost become impossible to think about (or at least consider) tongues outside the charismatic framework.

2. Speaking in unlearned human languages? Testimony of church history, multilingual cultures. For 95% of the church history timeline this passage was read straightforwardly, uniformly, and with rather mundane application for the church. The Greek word *glossolalia* means tongue, language. Bible teachers over the last 2000 years recognized when you understand “speaking in tongues” as a spiritual gift for speaking multiple human languages without having formally studied them, then the handful of relevant NT passages on tongues interpret one another consistently. Assuming the spiritual gift of tongues is speaking in unlearned human languages, then how is it a similar gift to speaking words of prophecy?

### **B. Speaking prophecy (v. 3)**

Not inspired/canonical “thus saith the Lord,” not predictive fore-telling, but Spirit-driven forth-telling of gospel truth. The key to understanding prophecy in the forth-telling variation is that it is *analogous not identical* to what Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets did. It is similar to the gift of preaching and teaching (1 Cor 11:2-5; 12:28-29; 13:2, 8-9; 14:1-40; Acts 2:17-18; 11:27-28; 19:6; 21:9-11; Rom 12:6; 1 Thess 5:19-21; 1 Tim 1:18; 4:14; 1 Jn 4:1). Prophecy is for building up, encouraging, and comforting Christians who gather (Isa 40:1; Jer 1:10). It includes any aspect of God’s message to people: providing insight, warning, correction, and exhortation (1 Cor 11:30; Rev 2:5, 16).

## **II. Related Spiritual Purposes**

### **A. Building up other Christians in love (vv. 3, 5-6, 12-13)**

Of all the spiritual gifts, these two are compared and contrasted. Paul ranks prophecy as a greater gift than tongues, but they are of equal rank if tongues are interpreted. It seems prophecy and interpreted tongues do the same thing—build up the body in love. What does love do in the church? It speaks to people for their upbuilding, encouragement, and comfort. It brings some gospel-centered, Bible-consistent, Jesus-aligned message: anything from a Spirit-revealed word, or a penetrating insight, or a prophecy, or a teaching. Tongues and prophecy have a related spiritual purpose.

### **B. Bringing non-Christians to God (vv. 24-25)**

Not only are tongues and prophecy for the benefit of believers, they also can have a positive effect on non-Christians when they are used appropriately and when the Holy Spirit chooses to powerfully draw people to himself in saving faith. When you hear words of prophecy, they can lay bare the secrets of your heart.

### III. Predictable Spiritual Pitfalls

#### A. Proudful self-expression in the assembly (vv. 1, 5-6)

1. *Principle of importance* (vv. 1, 5-6). Evaluated by the standard of love, prophecy is greater than tongues, even though speaking in tongues is flashy and exotic. Some gifts draw more attention than others, and when we pay more attention and assign more value to lesser gifts, not only is that person showing an immature lack of love, but the rest of the church has its attention drawn away from what is more important.

2. *Principle of catholicity* (cf. 1 Cor 12-13; 14:36-40). Whereas the Corinthians argued that they were special, an exceptionally Spirit-led church that could do things differently, Paul reminded them that Jesus had appointed and sent the apostles to establish a unified rule of faith and practice. “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (1 Cor 14:37-38). Spiritual flashiness should cause us to seriously reconsider whether we’ve swerved off the old path pioneered by the Lord and his apostles.

#### B. Confusing other Christians in the assembly (vv. 2-4, 7-19)

3. *Principle of edification* (vv. 3-4, 12-19). Strive for your spirit and mind to be fruitful to yourself and others. Because love is what matters most, those spiritual gifts that succeed in building up the church are the most important and to be particularly valued. The principle of edification applies to every aspect of a church’s worship and ministry. Here is a rule: if it is confusing, and efforts to educate do not adequately bring clarity, then it is not edifying and therefore not loving.

4. *Principle of intelligibility* (vv. 2, 7-11). Communication by its nature requires the successful transmission, reception, and comprehension of the message. The principle of intelligibility has many applications. Antiquated language and Christian-ese should be used sparingly, judiciously, and with the purpose of shedding light rather than shrouding in darkness. As we seek to biblically order our worship within the Reformed tradition, we must always remind ourselves that our Reformed forefathers championed at great cost the principle of intelligibility so everyone could understand—rich and poor, educated and simple, professional and tradesperson, adult and child.

#### C. Repelling inquirers/outsideers from the assembly (vv. 20-25)

5. *Principle of gospel-accessibility* (vv. 20-23). Paul quotes a curious passage from Isaiah to make an ironic point: unintelligible tongues are a “sign” for unbelievers—a sign of judgment because the gospel message did not get through to them. He’s telling us not to be an instrument of judgment for non-Christians, like the cruel Assyrians were for the Israelites, by obscuring the gospel in our worship and witness.

6. *Principle of holiness* (vv. 24-25). When a visitor/inquirer hears the gospel in the midst of a people who are loving each other with their spiritual gifts, and the experience of all that takes root in his heart, the inevitable response is wakefulness, wonder and worship. If you’ve experienced the trauma of the holy, you know the holiness of God repels and attracts at the same time. That is how the principle of holiness guards us from unnecessarily repelling people from God.

**Conclusion** – WLC 43 “How does Christ execute the office of a prophet? In his revealing to the church, in all ages, by his Spirit and word, and in diverse ways of administration, the whole will of God, in all things concerning their edification and salvation.” Except for “in all ages,” God calls you, in submission to Christ and his Word, to see yourself as a prophet. This is your identity as a Christian.