

7. The third section of the chapter comprises the first half of Paul's summary instruction regarding the use of the Spirit's gifts in the church assembly (14:26-33). In keeping with his approach to the subject, Paul's instruction focuses on the gifts of tongues and prophecy, but in order to make his larger point regarding the charismata *as such* and the way the saints are to regard and employ them in the life and ministration of the body. And the marrow of Paul's summary is the very thing he's been insisting upon throughout his treatment, which is that the Spirit's gifts are to be used in conformity to the will and work of the Spirit Himself; that is, they are to be employed and directed in such a way that they build up the body of believers. For all the diversity of the gifts and their manifold expressions, all are united by the common, singular goal of edification (v. 26).
- a. Paul's opening statement shows that he had in mind all of the Spirit's gifts and not simply tongues and prophecy. Nevertheless, he specifically addressed these two gifts in drawing out his summary inferences. And what he had to say about the gift of tongues is essentially a restatement of his previous instruction: Because edification is the purpose for the gifts, and because edification depends upon intelligibility, the legitimate use of tongues in the body demands interpretation (cf. vv. 5, 7-19). Where there is no interpretation – either by the speaker or someone else, there is to be no speaking in tongues in the assembly (vv. 27-28).

The only thing Paul adds here is the qualification that no more than three individuals are to be permitted to speak in tongues. The issue isn't the number of persons who speak *per se*, but the saints' obligation to maintain order and propriety in their gatherings. In all they are and do as individuals and as a body, believers are to testify to God and His gospel; they are to bear the fragrance of Christ in every place and in every situation and circumstance. And God is a God of order and propriety, not chaos and confusion (cf. vv. 33, 40). Just as tongues-speaking in the absence of interpretation communicates chaos and confusion and thus fails to edify, so it is with *too much* tongues-speaking. Even intelligible interpretation cannot secure the hearers' edification when they are distracted, confused and overwhelmed by a multitude of competing voices.

Here again it's important to recognize that Paul wasn't denying, deprecating or limiting the use of the gift of tongues *as such*. He understood and upheld the equal value and important contribution of tongues to the Spirit's work of building God's sanctuary. But the value and propriety – indeed the true *spirituality* – of this spiritual gift (and all of the Spirit's gifts) resides in its proper use according to the Spirit's purpose and will. Edification determines what is proper with respect to the charismata; in the case of tongues, edification – and therefore propriety – is a function of situational context. Here Paul was speaking of the use of tongues in the gathered assembly. Thus the stipulation of interpretation pertains only to the use of tongues where there is an audience of people who don't understand what is being spoken. No such requirement exists in the case of the private use of tongues or instances where the hearers do understand – as in the case of Pentecost or other missions situations in which the utterance is in the language of the audience.

- b. From tongues Paul turned his attention to the gift of prophecy. Up to this point his instruction has focused on tongues; Paul has only mentioned prophecy by way of contrasting it with tongues for the purpose of establishing the former's superiority. Now, in his summary instruction, Paul provides some insight into the prophetic gift and how it is to be viewed and utilized in the Church (vv. 29-33).

And just as one would expect, the same core principle applies to prophecy as to tongues: As a gift of the Spirit, prophecy has its purpose in the Church's up-building, and this means that this gift, too, must function under the constraints of order and propriety. A multitude of voices fosters chaos and confusion in the case of tongues-speaking, and so it is with prophetic utterance. *Disorder precludes intelligibility even when the hearers know the language being spoken.*

- Thus Paul limited the number of tongues-speakers – even under the assumption that their speech will be interpreted. (Where there is no interpretation, there are to be *no* tongues-speakers at all.)
- So it is with prophecy. If intelligible (interpreted) tongues-speaking must be limited for the sake of propriety and order in the cause of edification, so it must be with the intelligible speech that is prophetic utterance. Paul could not rightly constrain the one without constraining the other.

In the church assembly, two or three prophets are to speak (the assumption here being that the Spirit has pressed upon them something to communicate to the body), but with the understanding that their words are *accountable*. If propriety and order – i.e., the obligation of edification – dictate the governance of the number of prophetic utterances, they equally dictate the governance of the utterances themselves: The words of the prophets are to be judged (v. 29). But this raises the obvious question of *who* is to judge the words of the prophets. Was Paul referring to the other prophets present in the assembly or the whole body?

His subsequent statement seems to argue for the first option (v. 32), but this interpretation introduces its own problem: If prophetic utterances are accountable only to other prophets, what happens in instances where there are no others in a church body who possess the prophetic gift? Was Paul implying that, in such cases, prophetic utterances are to be set aside (or silenced) until they can be judged by the prophets in another church body? Or was he implying that the Spirit always bestows the prophetic gift on more than one person in a given congregation? Another option is that Paul was indicating what is to be *normative* practice in the churches rather than issuing a hard-and-fast directive.

It's more likely Paul was referring to the saints' obligation *as a body of believers* to test all things. Viewed this way, prophetic utterances are accountable to others with the prophetic gift, but they're also accountable to all of the saints in the body, all of whom have Christ's mind and are gifted by the one and same Spirit (cf. 12:1-3 with 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21; also 1 John 4:1; Revelation 2:1-3).

This interpretation is reinforced by Paul's insistence that the individuals who prophesy (and speak in tongues) are to also hold *themselves* accountable. Their persons, and not merely their words, are subject to the obligation of order and propriety for the sake of the body's edification. And this means that, if more than one person has a prophetic word for the assembly, each individual is to speak *in turn* in an orderly and respectful fashion. By doing so, each prophet can be heard and his words processed and assessed; such orderliness, respect and deference insure that the whole assembly is instructed and edified. Conversely, a lack of order insures confusion and incoherence; *though the prophets are speaking in the language of their hearers, their speech is rendered unintelligible*. This is certainly the case if the speakers are talking out of turn or over the top of each other, but they can also destroy the intelligibility of their words by distracting or offending their hearers through a disrespectful or prideful attitude. The old adage is certainly true that a person's actions can make it impossible to hear his words.

But if prophetic utterances are to be judged by the whole body, what did Paul mean that the "*spirits of prophets are subject to prophets*" (v. 32)? There are two basic ways this statement can be interpreted:

- The first possibility was alluded to above, which is that prophets and their words are accountable to other prophets – men who share the same gift by the same Spirit and so can discern the truth of what is being spoken. In this case, *spirit* likely refers to the illumining and directing power behind prophetic utterances. Thus John: "*Testing the spirits*" means testing utterances and ideas alleged to have their origin in the Holy Spirit to see whether they accord with the apostolic gospel as revealed and affirmed by the Spirit (cf. 1 John 4:1ff; Hebrews 2:1-4; also 2 Corinthians 11:1-13:10).
- The second option is that Paul was speaking of a prophet's individual obligation of personal discipline and accountability: The spirits of prophets are subject to prophets in the sense that *a prophet has authority over his own spirit*. Interpreted this way, Paul's point was that the prophetic ministry in the Church must not resemble the frenzied, out-of-control ecstatic utterances which characterized the paganism of Corinth. God's prophets are led by His Spirit, and God is not a God of confusion, but of peace (i.e., order and harmony) (vv. 32-33). Where the Spirit is leading, there will be order, propriety, respect, and deference resulting in edification, not chaos and confusion leading to agitation and disharmony.

The second interpretation best fits the context, which emphasizes restraint and order as critical to edification in the church assembly. Again, Paul insisted that those with the gift of prophecy were to govern themselves such that only two or three of them speak, and then one at a time in orderly fashion so that the assembly is instructed, encouraged and edified (vv. 29-31). That prescription is the premise for verse 32, which Paul then clarified by noting that God is a God of order and self-control (v. 33): As He is, so are His prophets.

Order, harmony, and propriety are to characterize everything about the assembly of the saints and their worship – not just at Corinth, but in all the churches (v. 33b). Paul applied this standard specifically to tongues and prophecy, not because it pertains only to them, but because they are the focal point of his treatment of the charismata. And they are the appropriate focus because they so effectively make Paul’s point: Of all of the gifts, none have a greater tendency to violate Paul’s criterion of propriety, order and harmony in the Church than prophecy and tongues. *Yet even these gifts – which so powerfully express the leading of the Holy Spirit – do not operate chaotically or beyond the control of the speaker.*

It’s not clear whether some at Corinth were claiming to be “carried away” in their use of their gifts; what is clear is that Paul discredited any such claims. The very fact that he directed the prophets and those speaking in tongues to limit and order their speaking shows that he believed they had complete control over the exercise of their gifts (cf. again vv. 27-28 with vv. 29-31). The implication, then, is that if any sort of disorder or disharmony arose in the assembly’s mutual ministration of the Spirit’s gifts, it was the result of their folly and sin, not the Spirit’s leading.

Every community of believers is accountable for their use of the charismata: If the Spirit gives His gifts for the purpose of the body’s edification (in all of its various components and facets), then the saints have no right to use them selfishly, arrogantly, foolishly, or recklessly.

- The Holy Spirit distributes His gifts to *individuals*, but in the context of and for the sake of the *body* of which the individual believer is part (ref. again 12:1-14). The Body causes the growth of the Body (Ephesians 4:16), and this implies that each part and its individual functioning is constrained by and accountable to the whole and its edification.
- Moreover, the examples of prophecy and tongues show that this accountability extends to the gifted *person* and not just to his *gift*. Paul highlighted the accountability of the persons by putting boundaries and definition on their use of their gifts. So he highlighted the accountability of their speech by demanding interpretation in the case of tongues-speaking and assessment by the body in the case of prophetic utterances.

An important corollary of the prophets’ accountability is the fact that Paul didn’t consider prophetic utterances to be infallible. On the one hand, there are those who claim the gift of prophecy but don’t actually possess it. Such individuals present their own notions as the leading of the Spirit. On the other hand, possessing this gift doesn’t imply perfect sensitivity to the Spirit. Prophets are capable of misconstruing or even missing the Spirit’s leading. Paul understood the limitations of the Church’s prophetic ministry, but that didn’t lead him to ban prophetic utterances; rather, he demanded that they be judged by the body of believers. *The community indwelt and taught by the Spirit is the rightful and only suitable judge of whether an utterance expresses the Spirit’s leading.*

This highlights the fact that, unlike so many in the Church, *Paul trusted the Spirit and His work in building God's sanctuary*. He didn't feel he had to protect the saints from possible error by erecting human boundaries, definitions or prescriptions; he had full confidence that the Spirit is able to preserve and perfect those under His charge. The easy answer to the fallibility of prophetic utterances is to silence them; Paul's answer was to trust the Spirit's power and leading.

Paul's instruction provides direction for how the prophetic gift is to be exercised in the assembly of saints, but it also provides insight into the gift itself. In that regard, he explicitly associated the gift of prophecy and prophetic utterance with *revelation* (vv. 29-31). Most Christians are comfortable with the idea of prophetic revelation in terms of the prophets of the pre-Christian era, but Paul was referring to prophets in the *New Testament Church*. Recognizing the implications of this, Christian scholarship has approached the matter in different ways.

As noted previously, the primary concern with *Christian* revelatory prophecy is the apparent threat it poses to a completed New Testament canon. Proceeding upon the conviction of a closed canon, Christians generally embrace one of two positions regarding the spiritual gift of prophecy.

- The *first* denies (implicitly or explicitly) that prophecy is revelatory. This has the obvious benefit of allowing for the prophetic gift to continue on in the Church while still upholding the axiom of a closed canon. Advocates of this view typically treat prophecy as roughly synonymous with *preaching*. This equation works relatively well in terms of this context in which prophecy represents speech that is intelligible and instructive (cf. vv. 18-19, 31), but Paul's definitions aren't that clear-cut. For instance, in this same context he distinguished between prophecy and *teaching* (14:6; cf. Romans 12:6-7), which is his most common designation for speech which instructs. Even more, in the same statement Paul distinguished between prophecy and *revelation*, though he later linked them together (vv. 29-31). More to the point, Paul never treats prophecy and preaching as synonyms. He regarded prophecy as a spiritual gift to be employed *in the Church*, whereas "preaching" designates his proclamation of the gospel in fulfillment of his apostolic calling to take the good news *to the world* (cf. 15:1-12; Acts 9:1-16; Romans 10:1-15; Colossians 1:24-29; 1 Timothy 2:1-7). But beyond these things, one cannot deny the revelatory quality of the spiritual gift of prophecy and be true to Paul's writing.
- The *second* way to resolve the difficulty of revelatory prophecy is to label prophecy a "sign gift" and then assert that this gift ceased with the completion of the canon. Under this view, prophecy in the Church (as it was in Israel) *does* involve human communication of divinely-revealed content, but the need for it ended when God's revealed truth was fully inscripturated. But as noted before, Paul gives no indication in this epistle or elsewhere that the gift of prophecy has ceased (ref. 13:8-12).

But if prophecy *is* revelatory – and Paul indicates that it is – and if it continues as a gift in Christ’s Church until the Parousia at the end of the age (the coming of “the perfect”), does it then threaten the notion of a closed canon? *The answer depends on how one defines “revelation.”* If a particular, narrow definition of revelation is assumed, there can be no ongoing revelation without an open canon. But if one defines revelation according to the scriptural terminology – that is, as an *unveiling*, then the apparent problem evaporates.

For the truth as it is in Jesus Christ – the truth to which the Scriptures bear witness – must be *revealed* to individual human beings (cf. Acts 2:22-37, 11:34-48, 16:11-14; Galatians 1:11-17; 2 Corinthians 3-4). This alone is sufficient to establish that revelation in some sense necessarily continues until the consummation at the end of the age. Moreover, *this revelation of the truth of Jesus Christ isn’t the result of a cognitive or exegetical analysis of words, but of the Spirit’s work in the inner man.* Paul himself is the quintessential proof that even the most intimate and scholarly knowledge of the scriptural text is not the same as the knowledge of the truth. For all his vast learning, Paul the biblical scholar was a blasphemer and grievous offender (1 Timothy 1:12-13). He knew vast amounts of information about God, but he didn’t know God *Himself* because he didn’t know Him as the Spirit reveals Him in Jesus Christ in the inner man.

Prophecy (like preaching and teaching) does involve the communication of divine truths to men, but truths that have been unveiled to the speaker (the “prophet”) through the leading of the Spirit. Thus prophecy involves the communication of Spirit-imparted insights – *insights into divine truth to which the Scripture gives its “amen,” but which cannot be discerned by analyzing a set of scriptural texts.*

All truth resides in the *person* of Jesus Christ (cf. John 1:14-17, 5:31-33, 14:6, 18:37 with Ephesians 4:20-24 and Colossians 2:1-3); the Scripture is a written witness that testifies to the One who is the truth (Luke 24:25-27, 44; John 5:39; etc.). The Scripture constitutes divine revelation in the sense that it is an accurate record of God’s words and works, *but God’s purpose in revelation wasn’t a written account which men can read and study.* His purpose was to reveal Himself *in* men and thus *to* them: to grant them the ever-deepening, person-to-person knowledge that is relational and living – the knowledge of the living God which is in Jesus Christ and which the Spirit causes to dawn and grow in the hearts of men (2 Corinthians 4:1-6). The Spirit is the Spirit of revelation (John 14:16-26, 15:26-16:15): His work is to reveal the living Jesus Christ by producing and perfecting His life in men. *The Scripture is a tool in that revelatory work, but so is the verbal communication of Spirit-imparted insights into the truth of God as it is in Christ.*

The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (Revelation 19:10) and the Spirit bears that testimony in the human heart. Thus the gift of prophecy is revelatory in that it serves the Spirit’s work of communicating the living knowledge of Christ to human beings. Until the whole creation is summed up in Him, prophecy will continue to have a vital role in the Spirit’s work of christiformity.