

# Spirituality IV: 1 Corinthians 12 & 13 (Specifically 1 Corinthians 12:3-13:3)

## An introduction to the spiritual gifts Prophecy, Discernment, Tongues

**Prophecy:** This gift takes many forms. The first thing that jumps to mind is the situation where someone says to us 'If you do this today, God will do this tomorrow' type of prophecy – and tomorrow it comes true. Whilst a prophetic word can be this direct (you may know of examples) this understanding of prophecy is very limited.

It is helpful to reflect on the word 'seer' as someone who gives spiritual advice and warning. In the Old Testament, prophecy is the preacher's response to how God will respond in a given situation: prophets offer a running commentary. For example, when Judah betrays her neighbour Israel and enters into a military pact with the mighty Assyria to save herself, the prophets warn that God is not impressed. The nation might be safe in the immediate future, but one day they will face exile. In essence, they have removed themselves from God's blessing. Conversely, the prophets encourage those who face hardship to remain faithful. God will deliver them. They will find *shalom*.

In the New Testament, Paul encourages members of the early Church to eagerly desire the gift of prophecy. He considers prophecy especially useful because it builds up the body (1 Cor 14). The prophet sees the potential in a situation and encourages people that if they persevere, God will bring fulfilment.

Personally, I believe that many people are gifted in prophecy but do not see it within themselves. If preachers are good preachers they will be studying the bible and considering how God has been at work throughout history. This allows them to show how God will be at work today, even if their prophecies are broad, simple truths. For example, the message, 'If you turn to Jesus he will welcome you with open arms' is a prophecy founded on scripture and corporate experience. Whilst it can be applied to anyone, there will be those who are listening who simply know that God is speaking specifically to them. Herein the preacher is being used prophetically. At other times preachers and ministers may discern a situation where God's blessing has to be declared in a way that builds up the body and assures everyone of the direction that a Church is taking. Ultimately, if our faith is worth anything it needs to give us a secure sense of direction in the everyday. Whilst this does not happen all the time, and we are left to reason for ourselves, there are times when prophecy has its place.

Note that if you do have the gift of prophecy, yours will be a ministry full of tension. The relationship between prophet and Church, and prophet and priest can be difficult. Often the prophet is fully committed to any given congregation but feels as if they are on the fringes, shouting in. Alternatively, they can feel called and sent with a particular word to a different context. At times they can become frustrated that their message is not being well received. They can even sulk before God. (Think Jonah!) Neither will they necessarily see the fruits of their ministry: future generations will. One of the hardest tasks for prophets is to leave aside the many things that might be wrong with the Church and focus on the one thing that God is leading them to say. Finally, remember that a prophet is not necessarily welcome in their home town. Whilst guarding against the twisted logic of 'The world is against me, so I must be right', do appreciate that if your message is rejected this does not mean you are wrong. Your task is to deliver the message. Let God do the rest. However, this tension between prophet and Church and prophet and priest means that your faith will need to be very secure.

Even so, just because someone has strong opinions and a confidence to express them does not mean that what they say is prophetic. How then do we discern who God is speaking through? Perhaps one pointer is the extent to which an individual is committed to discipleship and mission (as opposed to the fabric of the Church). I make this important distinction because it is possible for someone to treasure the traditions of the Church more than their personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ and the joy of serving as a disciple. John Wesley's sermon, 'The Almost Christian' speaks of such a divide. A second marker is that prophecy is used to build up the Church and not tear it down. The bearer of a prophetic word will always act in love, sharing the message with the leadership of the Church. Mindless gossip is not prophecy! However, on a number of occasions I have had members of Churches approach me in the final hymn simply wanting to share a word. I have known them well enough to trust them. A third marker may rest in the link between scripture and the message, although when speaking about mission, the bearer may not see it necessary to remind

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everyone of the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel! Fourthly, because there is an extrovert element to the gift (i.e. it reflecting on the world outside the walls of the Church), the prophet will have a greater sense of 'connexion'. (Note I use a Methodist word here.) Aware of how other traditions and congregations have responded to God in their contexts, those with a prophetic edge to their ministry will reflect on how we can learn from the experiences elsewhere. They will live life on a bigger map.

- 1/ Have someone ever shared a prophetic word with you?
- 2/ Did it ever come true?
- 3/ Have you ever sensed a strong urge to be God's voice, bringing encouragement in a specific situation? What did you do?
- 4/ What kind of prophecy can 'build up' the Church?
- 5/ What kind of prophecy will be unhelpful?

**Distinguishing between Spirits/Discernment:** As you have reflected about a sense of call in your life, have you ever asked the question, 'Is this God speaking, or me?' In doing so we are trying to *discern* whether the Holy Spirit is speaking to us or whether what we sense is more about what we want, rather than what God wants. Paul would describe this as a classic wrestle between the spirit and the flesh; God's desires and our desires. Whilst we could easily shift into a debate about what we mean by the term 'human spirit', we are all familiar with this kind of scenario.

Discernment also has its place when we decide who we should trust. This goes beyond a 'sixth sense' or 'women's intuition.' It is a sense of leading given by God that informs us as we go about our daily ministry. We may discern through a range of signals including non-verbal communication. Some of this will be covered in counselling courses. Even so, whilst secular counselling courses teach about self-awareness, the significance of body language and the importance of showing empathy, they will not address the subject of spiritual awareness.

As a Church council or leadership team, we may be discerning whether it is right for someone to take up a leadership role within the life of the Church. Alternatively, as a pastoral visitor we may be offering care and encountering people who are at the point of breakdown. They may be battling with emotions suppressed in an earlier phase of their life. They may be suffering from exhaustion brought on by recent pressures. They may be facing genuine spiritual oppression. In these instances the gift of discernment is vital in the care of those who ask for support and in the most serious cases, for our own protection. As you listen, you may discern how one issue is at the heart of a particular struggle, although the individual skims over it. It is important to let the person who has come for support have the freedom to share as they wish. It is also important to return to an issue that we suspect might be crucial, and invite the person to think about how it has impacted them. The most important task is to discern the right time to do this. One day the timing and the amount of emotional energy that the person has to spare may be lacking. Even though the individual may feel at peace at that moment, we may discern that they need more space.

In the most extreme of circumstances if we do not use the gift of discernment, we may suffer abuse. Think about how we would prevent a fight from breaking out between teenagers at a youth club or protect ourselves whilst we met the immediate needs of someone who has come to us drunk and in despair. Whilst we might not be able to state in categorical terms how we are led in these specific situations, and appropriate safeguard are always in place, it is the Holy Spirit that helps us to discern how we should we respond. People can be unpredictable. Be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. What may seem rational and sensible may not be spiritually wise,

- 1/ Can you think of a time when you have struggled to discern God's will over your own?
- 2/ How did you discern the right voice to follow?
- 3/ Can you think of an example when you have had to make a rapid decision over whether it is right to trust someone. Did you pray whilst you were thinking? What was the outcome?

**Tongues:** Much of this teaching has been covered in the study relating to the Day of Pentecost). The gift of tongues is one of the most controversial gifts both in the New Testament and in our modern context. Firstly, it is unclear as to whether the gift of tongues is the ability to speak or understand another language. This skill emerges instantaneously (cf Pentecost, Acts 2). Conversely, is the gift of tongues a spiritual utterance that puts into words that which we cannot express? (Rom. 8:26-27; Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). Secondly, this latter form of the gift can be used either within personal prayer or prophecy (1 Corinthians 14).

The gift of tongues features heavily within Pentecostalism and other strands of charismatic renewal. The difficulty for Churches with members touched by the spirit in this way is obvious. The presence of the gift immediately places the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual gifts on the Church radar. To their credit, many people who have this gift are sensitive to the pastoral and teaching context of the local Church which may not have adequate teaching or any clear policy on its use. The dilemma is whether we should allow the gift of tongues to be spoken audibly (but not loudly) by people as the Church enters a time of corporate prayer or whether we should limit its use. On the one hand some people may be persuaded of the presence of God and become more open to the work of the spirit. On the other those who are unaware of spiritual gifts may feel fearful and insecure. Whilst this latter position is unjustified in scriptural terms, the wider issue is whether use of the gift forces a teaching and pastoral response that a Church is not fully equipped to give: the Church is caught out.

Both of these contexts are at work in 1 Corinthians 14. Surprisingly, Paul states that 'Tongues is for unbelievers, prophecy is for believers'. In making this distinction he is delineating between prophecy in tongues and prophecy in plainspeak. When a prophecy was given in tongues it was offered by one believer and interpreted by another. Unfortunately, some members of the Church placed an undue emphasis on the gift of tongues. Paul urges them to desire more the gift of prophecy in plainspeak. Although this teaching was originally intended for Paul's context, my personal feeling is much the same. I want to affirm those of us who have the gifts of tongues but I believe that it is best used for personal prayer, quiet prayer within small groups and prayer for others within an intimate context such as the laying on of hands. One would hope that a member of a small group would share with others present that they have the gift, and ask if they may use it quietly. This allows for further discussion and personal testimony. In the case of someone responding to an invitation for prayer in a different context, be aware that the immediate use of the gift may give the responder another issue to think through, in addition to their immediate need. However, the gentle manner in which prayer and pastoral support is offered, together with the gift only being audible as the faintest whisper is unlikely to generate unease. Note – it is the manner in which the gift is used that is key. The responder wants to experience the supernatural! However, if they ask, a simple explanation such that 'I said a special prayer in a heavenly language' may be all that is required. I once heard of one man who had a heart attack and as he was being carried into the ambulance he was praying aloud in tongues. When asked by the paramedic what the language was, he said it was Hebrew! In all seriousness though, I wish to affirm everybody who has this gift. Use it in your everyday in your prayer life, especially when you do not know what to pray. If this is not your gift do not worry – God gives us different gifts.

**Orders of ministry:** As well as having different gifts, we also have different roles. In verse 27 –we read of apostles, then prophets, then teachers, then workers of miracles, then healing, then helping others, then administration, then tongues. It is important to recognise that this list is not definitive and that people are gifted spiritually in other ways. However, we must be careful about undermining their value by despiritualising them. I think the important emphasis is on our being used as a channel of the Holy Spirit. Whether or not flower arranging can be understood as a gift of the spirit misses the point!

- 1/ Do you think that people have spiritual gifts without realising it?
- 2/ Is it important for people to know that they have spiritual gifts – and are using them?
- 3/ Why might people be wary of the ministry of the Holy Spirit?
- 4/ Do you think these concerns are justified in your local context?