

Every two months or so we host a “Welcome to The Creek” lunch. We extend an invitation to anyone who is newer around here to join us for a meal and learn about our church. We talk about how to get connected and I tell a bit of my story. It’s an informal time to foster relationships and keep things at a big church as personal and relational as possible. The last two times we’ve had these lunches, nearly every seat has been filled. There are a lot of new folks showing up. I love getting to connect with new people. When I do, I try to ask two questions. The first is, “What brought you here?” As you’d expect the answers are all over the map: we are new to town or new to this side of town; we just had our first kid and we want to raise our family in church; I recently lost a loved one and I need God to help me in this time of grief; my co-worker invited me; I met someone at a restaurant and they invited me—so many different reasons. The second thing I ask is, “What’s keeping you here? What’s making you want to consider sticking around and making this your church home?” We get all sorts of different answers: we love the children’s ministry; the impact our church is making in the community is second to none; the worship is inspiring. They are all great answers and are honestly very humbling. Can I tell you my favorite answer to hear? I don’t hear it every time, but I’ve heard it numerous times. More than any other response I love to hear people say, “I’m drawn to this place because when I’m here, I sense the presence of God.” More than anything else it is the presence of God that ought to mark a church. Yes, it’s wonderful that we are serving our community. Yes, it’s wonderful that we are investing into children and students. Hopefully our worship is inspiring and our teaching is relevant and Bible-based, but more than anything else, the church is a place where God is present, where it is undeniable that he is alive, active and moving.

Today as we continue in our study of 1 Corinthians, we turn to chapter 14. This entire chapter, one of the longest in the entire book, is about how the church is supposed to function in a way that creates space for God to be at work among us in dynamic ways that both build up the faith of everyone who is already a believer in Jesus and then leaves those who aren’t followers of Jesus yet saying: “God is real, and he’s moving in this place.”

Before reading 1 Corinthians 14, I want to go to two passages in Scripture that set the stage. The first is Joel 2. In this Old Testament passage, which was written about 500 years before the birth of Jesus, God is speaking to people about what is going to happen when Christ comes into the world.

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)

Jesus is going to come and he’s only going to be among us for a few years, but through his life, death, and resurrection, through the sanctification and purification that comes through his work, he is going to usher in the age of the Holy Spirit, and every person who follows Christ is going to have access to the presence and power of God in their daily lives. They are not simply going to believe in God, they are going to experience him in undeniable and dynamic ways. In the Old Testament, the Spirit only came on the prophets, the priests, and the kings—only the few set-apart leaders who governed the country. But in this passage God promised to send his Spirit on everyone: all flesh, sons and daughters, old and young, even on servants, the lowest ranking class. What will be the sign of the Spirit’s presence? Well, among other things, prophecy, dreams, and visions. This is one of the greatest promises of the Old Testament.

Now move from Joel 2 to Acts 2. It’s been only a few weeks since Jesus rose from the dead. We know that for forty days he appeared at least a dozen different times to over 500 people. One of the times he

was with them he said, “That promise God made 500 years ago through the prophet Joel, that promise you heard me talk about again and again all throughout my ministry about the Holy Spirit giving you words to say, about the Holy Spirit being like streams of living water flowing from within you—now is the time! Stay here in this city and don’t go anywhere until it happens.”

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)

Just as Jesus promised, he sent the Holy Spirit. There was wind and fire—it created such a commotion that everyone in the city gathered to see what was taking place. They were confused and intrigued to see what was happening. Peter, the leader of the apostles, stood up, opened his Bible, and quoted from Joel 2, the passage we read earlier, and said, “The very thing God promised to do has now taken place!” Then he preached the gospel. People were cut to the heart. They were convicted that the message was true, and 3,000 people were baptized and saved. What prompted the salvation of 3,000 people? Yes, it was the fact that they heard the gospel and responded with faith and baptism. But the reason people were ready and willing to listen to the gospel is that they first saw the undeniable power of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of Christians. After seeing the Spirit on display in those lives they said, “We have to have an explanation; tell us more.”

That sets the stage for Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. When the Corinthians were coming together to worship, they were experiencing the Holy Spirit in powerful ways. But they were still young in their faith and didn’t really know the right or best way to create space for the Spirit. Think about a teenager who gets a new video game for Christmas. You might not see him again for three days until he beats it. Think about an adult who gets hooked on a new Netflix show and binges an entire season in a day. They go a bit overboard. Some of the people in Corinth, having new gifts from the Holy Spirit, went a bit overboard with their use of certain gifts when they gathered together. It was wonderful that they were experiencing the presence and power of the Spirit, but they needed to learn how to interact with the Spirit in a way that was constructive and profitable for everyone. The two specific areas Paul focuses on in this chapter are **tongues** and **prophecy**. To get us all on the same page, I want to define tongues and prophecy so we understand what’s being talked about.

“Tongues” is a private language of love between a believer and God. It is a special kind of speech, empowered by the Holy Spirit, which somehow bypasses the speaker’s conscious mind and allows them to express, in ways oftentimes outside their own comprehension, adoration, praise and gratitude to God. Speaking in tongues is not overly common in non-denominational churches like ours, but if you attended a charismatic congregation like a Pentecostal, Four-Square or Assembly of God church, nearly every person in those congregations would have the ability to pray like this. If they were more extreme, they might even go so far as to say if you don’t have this ability, then you are not a real Christian, because, in their minds, speaking in tongues is the ultimate proof that you have the Holy Spirit. I think that in some of these traditions it is more excess and extreme, and often it seems more contrived than sincere. But just because a few people have misused it doesn’t mean it’s not a real thing. I have personally never experienced tongues. But many of my closest friends as well as several people in my family speak in tongues on a daily basis in their own prayer life with God. Tongues can be very hard to understand for people who have never experienced it, but the best example I can think of is something I see every day when I watch my wife hold our seven-month-old baby boy. As she holds him, they talk to one another. Now he’s only seven months old, so he doesn’t understand syntax and can’t speak in multisyllabic words, but with the babbling and the cooing, with giggles and smiles, that sweet boy and that sweet mom, in an

intimate embrace are saying, in their own language, “I love, I love you, I love you.” That’s the essence of tongues. What was happening in Corinth is that, instead of keeping it as a part of their own prayer life—their own intimate relationship with God—people were speaking in tongues during the worship service in a way that was causing confusion and distraction, and honestly in a way that caused any non-believers who were among them to think, “These people have lost their minds.”

The other aspect is prophecy—communication that flows from the Holy Spirit’s dynamic work in the mind of a believer, often resulting in specific Scriptures, ideas, images, or dreams being pressed upon the believer with such spontaneity, conviction, and force that there is strong reason to believe the message came directly from God. Whereas I’ve never experienced tongues, I have experienced prophecy on numerous occasions. A number of years ago I was praying for someone in our church and as I prayed for him, I felt God impress a certain image of him in my mind, a picture I had never seen before. As I reflected on the picture, I thought God was telling me to pray two specific words over him: prayer and brokenness, and then to reflect on one passage from Scripture, Exodus 32. I wrote this all down in my journal. A few days later, without any correspondence, I was in my office and this guy, with no meeting or appointment, walked into my office. He said, “I have no idea why I am telling you this, but I was on my lawn mower a few days ago and God put these two words on my heart: prayer and brokenness.” And then he said, “I know I asked you to lead a Bible study on Joshua 5, but would you change your passage to Exodus 32.” My jaw hit the floor. I opened up my journal and showed him that I had written those exact things down, on the same day he felt God speaking to him. We knew, somehow, for some reason, God was talking to us.

Keren has the strongest gift of prophecy of anyone I know. We’ll be in church and walk by a woman and she’ll sense God say that she just had a miscarriage. Keren will go up to her and say, “I feel like I’m supposed to pray for you today.” The woman will start crying, “I need that so badly. We had a miscarriage a few days ago and are devastated.” If I had the time, I could tell you a hundred stories like that; it would take all day. Prophecy isn’t about knowing the Powerball numbers or who is going to be the next president of the US. It’s hearing from God about how he is working in people’s lives and, with that insight, being able to pray in a certain way or share a message of encouragement or confirmation.

We could go a lot deeper in both of these, but the real point is to have context for our passage. Let’s dive in.

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. (1 Corinthians 1:1-4)

Paul is saying that you should eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit. This is the age of the Spirit. You need to long and pray for him to be supernaturally moving in your lives and your church in powerful ways. But instead of being focused on tongues, where the person only edifies themselves (their own soul is enriched and nourished as they speak that prayer language), focus on gifts like prophecy that edify the church. If God gives you a Scripture or image, a dream or an insight about another person and you communicate it with them, the end result is that others are built up. The goal is their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. In other words, prophecy is to build up, stir up, or cheer up.

It comes down to this: is your participation when you come to church primarily about your own faith, your own walk with God, and your own enjoyment, or is your participation when you come to church also about others being built up and encouraged? Think of the difference between a dining experience

where you go to a restaurant, you are given a menu of all they offer, you order exactly what you want, it is brought to you, you eat it and enjoy it, you pay your bill and then you get up to leave. That's what almost everyone wants out of a restaurant, and that's what many people want out of a church—an experience customized to their taste and preferences that is about their getting what they want and need. Compare that to what I grew up calling a potluck, and when I moved to Indiana I learned is called a pitch-in. Every Wednesday night when our life group gets together, we have a pitch-in. Whoever is hosting that evening prepares the main dish, and every family brings something to contribute. One family brings homemade bread, another family brings fresh fruit, another family brings mashed potatoes, another family brings homemade ice cream for dessert. It's not one person feeling the weight and pressure to feed the entire group; everyone is coming to contribute! The only people who don't contribute are guests and children, and if someone has had a particularly challenging week, they get to come and just receive without the expectation of contributing.

That is what God wants our worship gatherings to be like! Look farther down in the chapter at verse 26: “What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” When they come together for worship, who is supposed to take responsibility for the building up of the church? The senior pastor? The worship leader? The elders? No! Look: each one of you is supposed to have something to contribute to other people. It has to be done in an orderly way that isn't distracting, but we are all supposed to contribute to the building up of one another! How can you build others up: by a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. That's not an exhaustive list. That's just five different examples of the sorts of things you can do to build others up. You can share Scripture, you can pray, you can give a word of encouragement or exhortation, you can lend a listening ear and share your discernment. There are so many ways to participate, but the end goal is that the church be built up. For that to happen, everyone has to desire the gifts of the Spirit and then use the gifts of the Spirit when we are together.

I want to give a specific challenge to our church. One of the things I love most about this church is how much we love the Bible. If something is in Scripture, even if it's challenging, we want to do it. I want to challenge us from 1 Corinthians 14:1-4 to “follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit,” especially prophecy. I think we need to grow in our desire for the gifts of the Spirit, especially the gift of prophecy. Our problem isn't that we have so many people in our worship services who are moved by the Spirit that it's a distraction; our issue is that we don't have enough people moved by the Spirit. It's not that we have so much supernatural stuff that it's confusing; we actually need to create space for more supernatural stuff to take place so that when people are here, they know this isn't just a gathering of people who believe in God, but this is a gathering of people who are really, truly, and undeniably experiencing God's power and grace in their lives on a daily basis. How can we create more space for the Spirit of God to move powerfully when we come together? I have three simple ideas.

*Ask God for more spiritual gifts.* It begins with asking. Because we are commanded to eagerly desire greater gifts, and especially the gift of prophecy, start asking God in your own prayer life for him to give you more gifts. Asking God to give you more gifts is kind of like me asking God to give me more muscles. God doesn't usually just supernaturally give someone a bodybuilder physique, but as I put in time in the gym and on my diet, slowly but surely I begin to see muscles develop. If we ask God for these gifts and then we spend time in Scripture and prayer and mentorship with those who have experience, we are likely to see these gifts develop.

*Create space to use spiritual gifts.* Be intentional and purposeful about getting to church 5-10 minutes earlier than you currently do. When you leave church, be intentional and strategic about leaving church 5-10 minutes later. At most it will cost you 20 minutes of your week. But those few minutes on the front

end and back end of service create the opportunity for you to do the things that are talked about in this passage. With a thousand people in our worship service, there isn't space for everyone to get up and have a turn at the microphone, but if you are here 10 minutes earlier there is plenty of opportunity to connect with the people next to you, ask how their week is going, share something God did in your life, pray together. Maybe as you are talking with one another or praying, give a moment of openness to ask, "God, is there anything you want to say, anything you want to reveal?" Do the same when the service is over. Don't be on a mad dash to beat the line to pick your kids up. Don't be on a sprint to be first in line for lunch. Stay ten minutes later and talk to the people around you. If you don't know them, introduce yourself. If you do know them, go deeper. Talk about what was preached. Encourage them in ways they have lived out the passage or challenge them to find a fresh way to live it out this week and then talk about what you did next Sunday when you come back together to hold each other accountable. You are creating space for God to move and make this time on Sundays about far more than simply your edification but also about edifying others and building up our entire community.

In addition to coming a few minutes earlier and staying a few minutes later, increase your level of commitment to your life group and be sure that when you meet together there is space for vulnerability and prophecy. There was a time in our group when someone opened up about a big decision they were getting ready to make and asked for advice. I was leading the group that night, so I said, "Before anyone says anything, we are going to take two minutes and sit in silence. We are going to each pray and listen to see if we sense God giving us any insight on this decision. When the prayer time is over, no one is allowed to give their opinion or advice, we are only going to speak something the Lord has given us to share."

*Share what you believe God is communicating with wisdom and humility.* We don't need to be wild and crazy, running around in a disorderly matter, saying off-the-wall things. I had a good friend in college named Andy. Andy was the guy all the girls liked. One time a really a strange girl on campus came up to him and said, "God told me we are supposed to get married." Only on a Bible college campus! She took her shot. Andy did one of these things (folded his hands and looked toward the sky) and said, "God told me you are crazy." It's not about being weird. But we do want to recognize that the Holy Spirit of God is alive and active among us. He wants to speak to us; he wants to communicate and connect with us and get our attention. The goal is to be naturally supernatural.

Let me give you one biblical example of this, and then one modern example from just this week. The biblical example is Acts 13. This is a snapshot of what was happening at the church in Antioch. "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." They were gathered together as a church, worshiping the Lord, and what happened? The Holy Spirit spoke. We don't get the sense that it was an audible voice like James Earl Jones: "*Set apart Barnabas and Saul.*" Someone felt God was saying this, they spoke it, others confirmed it. Because they believed it was from God, they sent Barnabas and Saul. This is what launched the planting of dozens of churches, the evangelism of Europe, and the writing of thirteen letters of the New Testament. It all started when people in a worship service had a word of prophecy. They shared it with one another, discerned that it really was from God, and then moved.

I saw that happen in the last week. Keren and I are really good friends with people in a different congregation. Several people in that church decided to take three days to worship the Lord and fast, like in Acts 13, and see if God would put anything on their hearts. When they finished their fast, several families came together to compare notes—"What do you think God said? What did God say to you?" Several of the families, independently of one another, felt God was calling their small group to pay off the student loans of one of the members of their community. This was a really hard-working guy who has

integrity and character and wisdom, but he was having a hard time getting ahead because he had \$45,000 of debt from his schooling. As these families prayed, they felt God had given them not simply a good idea, but a word of prophecy: make a sacrifice, and pay off his loans. They pooled their resources, and one of them even decided to start working a second job so they could contribute more meaningfully, and the group entirely eliminated this guy's \$45,000 debt. This all happened this week. Our friends told us that story and we both started crying. That's what the church is supposed to be about. God is moving, we are listening, we respond, we pick our cross and sacrificially love one another, people are built up and encouraged, and then when people come to our church, or they hear about what is happening here they say, "Do you know what his special about that church? God is moving in that place."

In verse 25 of our passage today, Paul says when people are really listening and responding to the Holy Spirit, serving, loving, and building one another, "even those who don't believe will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" This comes back to the very beginning of the sermon. The greatest compliment someone can give this church is that, when they are here, they sense that God is really among us. If we want that to be true, every person here needs to create space for the Spirit to move. Let's do it. We are going into a time of communion. Ask God to speak. Open your heart and mind for God to communicate with you in a special way. If he presses something on your heart, share it with someone. We want to be a church where people say—God is really among you!