

My purpose in preaching this sermon is that we will come to church prepared to share with others what God has revealed to us.

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. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.

Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Church is for what you put into it, not what you get out of it.

The recurring emphasis in this passage is that the Corinthian saints ought to be much more concerned about whether they are building one another up when the church gathers for worship. The default human position is for a person to want to do things for his or her own benefit. Whether it's going to church or buying groceries, changing the channel on the TV or refusing to clean up after oneself, most people very naturally and easily choose to do what they believe will validate their own self-worth rather than choosing to do what will be of greatest benefit to others. So the Corinthians also, being naturally human, generally seem to have considered going to church something that they did for their own benefit. In other words, they went to church because of what they got out of it. But Paul's point is that the church is for what a person puts into it, not what he gets out of it.

If a person believes much of what he reads online these days, there are many people who have quit going to church because they "don't get anything out of it." They haven't given up on God or turned away from Jesus; they still want to read the Bible and pray; they just can't see how doing these things with other people is of any value. In their estimation, church is a sort of commodity; and the point of going to church is to sing some songs that a person finds inspiring in a musical style that is attractive, listening

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to a sermon that is comforting and affirming, and having these experiences in a setting that is aesthetically pleasing with likeminded and “compatible” people. An experience like *that* would surely send a person off feeling motivated come back again the next Sunday, wouldn’t it? But, apparently, too many people aren’t having these kinds of experiences at church.

If a person gets out of church what he *wants* to get out of church, of course he’s more likely to come back; but the same thing can be said about going to the opera and being thrown in jail. A person who goes to the opera because of what she gets out of it might be accused of having an out-dated taste in music, but probably nothing more serious than that. A person who has himself intentionally thrown in jail because of what he gets out of it is probably open to much more significant charge. And what about a person who continually returns to church because of what he gets out of it? That kind of person, Paul says, is childish. That kind of person is misusing – perhaps even abusing – those with whom he gathers when he assumes and acts as though the meeting of the church is all about satisfying his craving for self-affirmation. Church, Paul writes, is not for what a person gets out of it; church is for what a person puts into it.

Does that mean that a person isn’t supposed to get anything out of church?

Now, I can hear a question – and it’s a good question – that goes something like, “Do you mean that a person isn’t supposed to get anything out of church?” Is church just supposed to be like slave labour, where a person shows up, gives whatever he’s got, and walks away empty-handed? Or is church just supposed to be like some form of penance; where we do something that we don’t want to do because we’re told it’ll be good for us, even though we can’t expect to see the reward for it in this lifetime? If church is for what we put into it, is it ever right to expect to get anything out of it?

One of half of the answer is, “Yes, it is right to expect to get something out of church, as long as we’re expecting the right thing.” A believer should be able to go to church expecting to be “built up.” Paul draws one particular comparison throughout this passage: that speaking in tongues builds up the person who speaks in tongues, but prophecy builds up the whole church. For this reason, Paul urges the Corinthian saints to desire the work of prophecy; in this way, the whole church will be built up.

The second half of the answer is this: that it is right for a person to expect to get something out of church when those who gather together are committed to putting the right things into church. We often talk about how what a person puts into something will directly impact what – or how much – he gets out of it. Church works the same way. No, I don’t think that there’s some sort of equation that a person can work through to figure out exactly how many minutes of effort he should put into church to get the appropriate amount of worth out of it. I simply mean that, if a person puts no effort into preparing himself to bring something to church, he will likely not get anything out of it either.

Yes, a person should be able to expect to get something out of church; he ought to expect to be built up as a result of having been to church. However, there are two very important considerations to work through. First, we must understand what it means to be built up, so that we come to church expecting the right result. And, second, we must understand who is supposed to be doing the building up, so that we know who to hold responsible when it isn’t happening. Yes, we are supposed to get something out of church: we are supposed to be built up. And who is responsible for the building up? The church is, that’s who.

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The church gathers for saints to build one another up.

Paul addresses this passage to the whole church in Corinth. Every member of the church receives the same exhortation: “Pursue love and be zealous for the work of the Spirit, especially that you may prophecy” (14:1). One of the side-tracks that we could wander down is a discussion about “spiritual gifts” being work for us to pursue rather than discoveries for us to make about hidden talents and abilities. Or we could stop and wonder for a while why Paul asks rhetorically in 12:29, “Are all prophets?” expecting the answer, “No”; but then in 14:1 he instructs the whole church to desire the work of prophecy. That seems a little confusing. Does Paul mean to make a distinction between a Christian who *is* a prophet and one who may occasionally *do the work* of a prophet (in the same way that I occasionally do a little work on my vehicles, but anyone who called me a mechanic would be grossly overestimating my abilities)? I don’t have a good answer to that question, except to say that Paul certainly does call the whole church without exception to pursue the work of prophecy. Paul clearly does mean that the responsibility for building up the church falls to every member of the church.

The church gathers for saints to build one another up. I don’t make a point of this because we are in the midst of a pastoral evaluation, as if this is meant to take all the responsibility off of me and put it back on you. Of course I’m still responsible for the work of building up the church, just as every one of you are, too. If I stood here and said, “I alone am responsible for the work of building up the church; you just leave it to me!” that would be about the most arrogant, pig-headed, and unscriptural thing a pastor could say or think. The work of building up the church belongs to each and every saint. That’s what we mean when we say, “Church is for what you put into it, not what you get out of it.” We don’t mean that there’s nothing for you to get out of it; we meant that in order for the saints to get the right thing *out of* church, they’ve got to put the right thing *into* church.

If the members of the body expect to be built up when the church gathers, then the members of the body must take seriously their responsibility to build one another up when the church gathers. The way that Paul instructs them to build one another up is to eagerly desire the work of prophecy.

Prophecy may sound like a scary thing, but it’s really quite simple. The principle of prophecy is this: Prophecy is the act of sharing with others what God has revealed to you. One of the biggest keys to understanding what Paul means by prophecy is the way that he compares it to speaking in tongues. The basic difference is that speaking in tongues is not understandable to others (unless someone else interprets the message) while prophecy *is* understandable to others. “For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to me but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries in the Spirit” (14:2). The purpose of speaking in tongues is not speak to other people, but to speak to God. It is very difficult, then, for the practice of speaking in tongues to be of much use in building others up.

People have long debated and disputed exactly what the practice of speaking in tongues is. Some will argue that speaking in tongues is only and always what happened to the apostles on the Day of Pentecost, when they were enabled to speak in other languages that those present understood but were not previously know by the apostles. (I’ve read accounts of this kind of thing happening in very recent times, as well.) Others will say that speaking in tongues happens when a believer is given a language by the Spirit of God that may not be intelligible to anyone else – indeed, may not even be understood by the one using the language – but is nevertheless a form of direct, spiritual communication with God. It is possible that this practice of speaking in tongues is what Paul referred to in Romans 8: 26: “... the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes

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for us in groans that words cannot express.” But Paul doesn’t seem to be too interested here in defining exactly what the work of speaking in tongues is. For us to press down too hard for a particular definition would be to miss Paul’s point. The point is that if no one else understands what a person says, then it is very difficult – I hesitate to say impossible – for anyone else to be edified or built up by it. And since the purpose of a church gathering is that the saints should build one another up, this makes the work of speaking in tongues poorly suited to corporate worship.

It’s important to note that nowhere does Paul say or insinuate that believers should not speak in tongues. In verse eighteen, Paul says, “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.” He certainly doesn’t downgrade the work of speaking in tongues. In verse thirty-nine he specifically instructs, “Do not forbid speaking in tongues.” If we go back to verse four, we read that “He who speaks in tongues edifies himself.” The work – or gift – of speaking in tongues produces the edification – or building up – of the one who speaks in tongues. That’s a good thing; a good result. It’s just not the appropriate goal of corporate worship. A believer ought to gather together with the church for the purpose of building *others* up, not building up *himself*.

The church gathers for the saints to build one another up. The work of prophecy builds up the church, because prophecy is understandable speech. The point of understandable speech is that others are then able to respond to it. I think Paul points in this direction with the illustration of a trumpet that, failing to sound a discernable call, does not rouse anyone to action. And certainly, Paul does get to that place in verse sixteen when he writes, “If you are praising God with your spirit” – that is, with a language unintelligible to others – “how can one ... who does not understand say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving?” The point of speaking in a worship gathering is that others are given the opportunity to respond. In this way, all the saints of the church have opportunity and calling to build one another up by prophesying.

The church gathers for the saints to build one another up. This is accomplished when the saints prophecy, which is nothing more complicated than sharing with others what God has revealed to you.

Prophecy is sharing with others what God has revealed to you.

Prophecy is sharing with others what God has revealed to you. When we speak of prophets we often think of larger-than-life, grey-haired men with large beards who confront kings and nations and accuse them of great sins. Yes, some prophets did that. Prophets also delivered messages of comfort and consolation, of peace and encouragement. Prophets are people who spoke the truth of God into specific situations, and often in order to achieve specific results: usually to bring about a change in behaviour in God’s people. Perhaps even that seems like a fearful challenge to you, but consider this: surely every Spirit-filled believer – for all believers are spiritual – has a story to tell about how God spoke to you in Scripture or in prayer in such a way that the truth of God was revealed to you and you were compelled to respond to that through either by doing something or ceasing to do something. If you can tell a story about how the word of God has changed your life, you can prophecy. I agree that there may be much more to prophecy than just that, but I do believe that telling others how the word of God has changed you *is* an act of prophecy. Sharing with others a message that God spoke to you is an act of prophecy. Sharing with others how the truth of God impacts a certain situation or circumstance in your life is an act of prophecy. Speaking the truth about God in such a way that others understand and are able to respond is an act of prophecy.

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Prophecy builds up the church. Prophecy is something that every believer can do; it is what we are all called to bring with us when we come to a worship gathering. Church is first a call for us to put something in. We are called to put into church our testimony to the power of the word of God. That is prophecy. And we already have several ways of incorporating prophecy in our worship. Sometimes the service leader prophecies; sometimes the one leading singing prophecies. Sometimes it happens during the Children's Ministry or the Special Ministry. Sometimes it happens during the sermon or when people are sharing prayer requests and reasons for praise.

How many people who leave church because they "don't get anything out of it" would have a different mindset if they regularly prepared themselves to bring something to put into church? In other words, do you think that many people *would* get much more out of church if they prepared themselves to put something *into* church? And quite certainly the work of prophecy requires preparation. The work of prophecy has its roots in Scripture and in prayer. A person who spends no time in Scripture and prayer will be uneducated in hearing and recognizing the word of God; and if a person cannot hear and recognize the word of God, then neither can he share that word of God with others. If there is no preparation made for a worship gathering, attending it will likely be of little value. It will be of little value because a person will have nothing to contribute – nothing to put into the gathering.

What, if anything, do you think might change in our regular worship services if every one of us woke up with the thought in mind, "What will God reveal to me today that I will be able to share with others so that they will be built up in their faith?" I certainly recognize that even when we are diligent in seeking out the word of God, it may be that not every day or every week or every month produces this kind of fruit. However, if we do not begin our days intent on seeking out this fruit, we are likely to miss it when God is ready to give it.

Church is for putting something into, not for getting something out of. As believers, we are called to worship together in order to build one another up. We build one another up by sharing with others what God has revealed to us. It's called the work of prophecy. It requires significance preparation. The results are significant, too. When God's saints gather to build one another up through the work of prophecy, the church of God is strengthened, and, as we shall see next week, unbelievers in our midst will see the power of God's presence among us.