

Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14

In this article we will look at prophecy as this is defined in 1 Corinthians 14.

1. Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14: definition

Prophecy according to 1 Corinthians 12, 14, is the manifestation of the holy spirit through which God gives a message directed to the body of the believers present in the meeting and with purpose their edification, exhortation and comfort. As 1 Corinthians 14:3-4 says:

1 Corinthians 14:3-4

"But one who prophesies speaks to men **for edification and exhortation and comfort**. he who prophesies edifies **the church**."

You immediately have here both the audience of the prophecy and its purpose. The audience is the church, the body of the believers present in the meeting¹. The purpose of prophecy is to edify, exhort and comfort the audience, the body of the believers. In a church meeting therefore prophecy - i.e. messages from God brought forth from the believers for the edification, exhortation and

¹ It is also evident by reading 1 Corinthians 14 that the subject of Paul in this chapter is the meeting of the believers. See for example 1 Corinthians 14:23-24.

comfort of the church – was present in the New Testament times and should normally be present today too.

[2. Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14: not the same as the ministry of a prophet \(Ephesians 4:11\)](#)

Now, we must not confuse the manifestation of prophecy, discussed in 1 Corinthians 14 with the ministry of a prophet. As Ephesians 4:11 says:

[Ephesians 4:11](#)

"And He gave some as apostles, and some as **prophets**, and some as evangelists, and some as shepherds and teachers"

I believe the prophet of Ephesians 4:11 is quite different than the prophet of 1 Corinthians 14 and his prophecy. Though both bring forth a message from God, the purpose of the manifestation of prophecy of 1 Corinthians 14 is the edification, exhortation and consolation of the local church. What I mean is that it is not in the scope of this prophecy to prophesy about things that will happen in the future or what will happen to the nation or to give prophecies directed by name to one specific person. Such prophecies may still be valid prophecies. However when 1 Corinthians 14 speaks about prophecy does not mean prophecies of this kind. There may be of course in the church people with the ministry of a prophet, in the sense of Ephesians 4:11. But this is not what 1 Corinthians 14 is speaking about when it mentions prophecy. As 1 Corinthians 14:5 says:

[1 Corinthians 14:5](#)

"Now I want you ALL to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy;"

Paul's desire, want, was that ALL speak in tongues and even more, ALL prophesy. As he also says in the same chapter:

1 Corinthians 14:31

“you can ALL prophesy one by one..”

and in 1 Corinthians 14:1

“Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may **prophesy.**”

We can ALL prophesy i.e. bring forth a message from God for the edification, exhortation and comfort of the local church. But this does not mean that we are all having the ministry of a prophet in the sense of Ephesians 4:11. In the body of Christ, some of us may indeed have the ministry of the prophet but not ALL of us have it (the other ministries are needed too!), though, as 1 Corinthians 14:31 tells us, every believer can prophesy in the sense of 1 Corinthians 14 for the edification, exhortation and comfort of the local church.

3. Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14: not a sermon

Let it also be clear that prophecy is not giving a sermon either. I need to say this as I have heard several times that prophecy is more or less a preacher giving a sermon. But prophecy is NOT a sermon or a teaching. Prophecy is a message coming directly from the mouth of God - by revelation - and addressed to the believers that are present. It is God that speaks in the prophecy, **directly in the first person.** Prophecy and teaching are two different things and they are

both necessary! Also when we read first Corinthians we must keep in mind that what Paul is calling as church meetings were, in my understanding of the Scriptures, meetings done in houses. There was nothing like an auditorium that can sit from 500 to 5000 people with a pulpit in the midst and pews all looking to the front, to a priest or a preacher. People are asking “how can we have in our church meetings what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 14”? However, by “church meeting” though they usually mean the way this meeting is done today. We are trying thus to fit what Paul says in the way we are meeting today and in the structure our meetings have. But we need to understand that what Paul or the New Testament defines as church meetings have much more to do with house meetings and active participation from everybody than with our model of Sunday services. As 1 Corinthians 14:26 says:

1 Corinthians 14:26

“How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, **each of you** has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

In the first century church, the active and spontaneous participation of the believers (“each of them”) in the meeting was the normal. Not only was it allowed, but it was also expected! “**Each of you**” says Paul. Each of them was bringing to the meeting whatever he had: a psalm, a teaching, a tongue with interpretation, a revelation. The purpose? The edification of the body of the believers. They were all participating with whatever God had given them. This is definitely something we have lost today.

[4. Prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14: my experience](#)

By reading 1 Corinthians 14 it is obvious that in the first century church gatherings, prophecy (and speaking in tongues with interpretation) was the norm! Not the exception! In contrast, in most of the gatherings I have been these gifts that God has given for the edification of the church are simply non-existent. They exist as gifts. In fact they may even be accepted theologically by the respective congregation. Yet they are never applied. The truth is that in many congregations there is simply no space for them. The gifts that God gave for the edification, exhortation and comfort of the body have been replaced by a rigid program that has the form either of a formal liturgy, where one person does the same week after week (catholic / orthodox church), or, in the protestant church, of a program (it is also a liturgy in some way) that says first we sing, then the pastor and perhaps a couple of others pray, then we have the sermon and then the meeting ends. If somebody thinks that God has a message for the gathering, there is simply no way in many churches to say it! The participation of the people is practically forbidden! In some other gatherings if somebody wants to bring forth a message from God, he has first to tell the pastor or the elders, then they have to think about it and whether it comes from the Lord and then allow or not allow the person to share it. But in the first century church, in the church the epistles speak about, it was not like this. See what Paul says:

[1 Corinthians 14:29-31](#)

“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged.”

Everybody could get up and prophesy (for edification, exhortation and comfort) and the others would evaluate the message. Prophecy was the norm, it was free for everybody to do it and it was done !

Now, I have also been in some other gatherings, where many of the participants behave in a strange manner. There is a constant sense of confusion in the meeting, with people groaning heavily, others speaking in tongues without interpretation, or start giving “revelations” that have not much to do with the “edification, exhortation and comfort” of the church or throwing themselves on the floor and staying there like they are unconscious, attributing this to “the spirit”. In many cases the neighbors of such churches call the police, because of the anarchy and the noise of such meetings. Also, many times the examples of these kind of meetings are used by churches of the first type (the rigid ones I spoke about previously) to justify their rigidity and high control. But that’s not what prophecy, as this is described in 1 Corinthians 14, is. There must be order in operating prophecy (as well as speaking in tongues with interpretation) in the meeting. Here is what the Scripture says:

1 Corinthians 14:27-33

“If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. **And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.**”

Many times in these wild meetings, people justify their behavior by saying that “the spirit took over of me and made me do this or that”. But find this in the New Testament please? What I find in the New Testament concerning prophecy is **order**. When somebody speaks in tongues there must be interpretation. Otherwise: “if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God” (1 Corinthians 14:28). How many should speak in tongues/interpret and prophecy? Everybody at the same time? No! “If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret... . Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent” (1 Corinthians 14:27, 29-30). People behaving in a weird manner in the meetings claim that “the spirit took over of them”? Well, I don’t read this in my Bible. What I read is that “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:32-33). Is there confusion in a meeting? Don’t blame it to God or to the manifestations of His spirit. God gave clear instructions in His Word about the manifestations of the holy spirit and how these should be done orderly. If now some do not follow these instructions this obviously is not God’s fault nor it is a fault of the manifestations of His spirit. God has nothing to do with confusion! Do not reject the gifts of God because of this. Instead pursue them. “Earnestly desire the spiritual *gifts*” (1 Corinthians 14:1) says Paul. Desire them therefore earnestly and apply them with order, according to the instructions.

Finally, there is also another kind of meetings where I have been, this time in my homeland Greece. There, we were gathering in homes and among other things we were also doing the following: we were taking time in the meeting waiting on the Lord to see what He wanted to say and we were bringing forth

messages from God, through prophecy and speaking in tongues with interpretation. The content of the messages God spoke was indeed always edifying, exhorting and comforting. It was God's Father heart manifested. This is the closest I have been to the manifestations of speaking in tongues with interpretation and prophecy as this is defined in 1 Corinthians 14. I recently read a wonderful book by Greek Orthodox priest [Eusebious Stefanou](#). He is a lonely figure in the Greek Orthodox denomination spreading fervently a very Christ-center message. The book is called "the charismatic movement from an Orthodox point of view" and it is in Greek. There the author gives examples of real prophetic messages, expressed in meetings of believers. I copy them below to give to the reader an idea of the nature of prophecy discussed in I Corinthians 14:

"You are my children and I'm pleased with you"

"The Father knows His children and takes care of each of them"

"My children: give yourself to me. Make your fears known to me. Leave yourselves to my care"

"There is no wrath in me for you"

"I want to teach you to conform to my Son and to know me as your Father"

"Allow me to be revealed to you and in you. Allow me to love you fully"

"Do not be afraid of my words. Allow your hearts to receive from me"

“Give yourselves to me and I will hold you and I will carry you and you will know my care, says the Lord”

To say it in one sentence: prophecy in the meaning of 1 Corinthians 14 is the personal, by God himself, in first person, building up, exhortation and comfort of His church, of the body of the believers.

I’m leaving far from my homeland the last 11 years in Germany and apart from a couple of times, I haven’t come across this edification, exhortation and comfort that God designed for the believers through prophecy or speaking in tongues with interpretation. Prophecy is a wonderful gift, that most of the time - and this is only my personal experience - is either not used (controlling, rigid meetings) or it is abused (meetings full of confusion and people behaving and acting strangely). This is very sad because as long as prophecy is not there or it is abused a voice of God that God Himself designed for the gatherings of the believers to personally exhort them, build them up and comfort them is silenced.

I will close here with the following exhortation from the word of God:

I Corinthians 14:1

“**Earnestly desire** the spiritual *gifts*, especially that you may prophesy.”

This is the will of God as it is expressed through His Word. People may say many things about it. But what really matters is one: what the Word of God says!

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