



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 Corinthians 14:1–5

1 Corinthians

“The Superiority of Prophecy to Tongues”

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the confidence that is ours through Jesus Christ, our Lord. We thank Thee for the promises that are found in the Scriptures. We also thank Thee for the exhortations, the words of confidence the prophecies, the teaching, so many of the things that are so necessary for us if we are to walk in a way that is pleasing to Thee. We pray, Lord, that Thou art to enables us to come to love the Scriptures and desire to read them and ponder them and follow them.

We thank Thee of one of whom it speaks, the—they—they speak of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for the plan of God, so marvelous in its length and breadth, and depth and height. We thank Thee for the encouragements that we have that thou art managing the affairs of this universe so that there shall be a successful consummation and that the Scriptures shall be seen to be the Word of God.

We ask, Lord, Thy blessing upon this assembly, upon this church, upon the friends of those who are here and the families of those with whom they are most identified and those for whom they are concerned. We pray for them. We ask Thy blessing upon them. We pray for the sick. We pray for those who’ve requested the prayers of the member of Believers Chapel.

And we ask, Lord, that thou wilt give answers to prayers in accordance with Thy will. We thank Thee for the hours in which we may turn to Thee and the busy lives that many of us here have. We thank Thee that we’re able to turn aside to read the Word of God and to think about how that

Word applies to us in our lives, our daily lives, our families, our children. We pray that our hour this evening may be enlightening and it may be encouraging and it may be comforting to us.

We commit the hour to thee and pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Well, we’re turning to 1 Corinthians chapter 14, and we’re looking in verse 1 through verse 5 this evening. And I’d like to read these five verses, and then we’ll go back and seek to expound some aspects of them that pertain to our general exposition of this unusual epistle, 1 Corinthians. Apostle writes in verse one, “Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially”— Well, that’s not the normal word for especially. That’s the word really that means but the more. And what he means by saying “the more” is to contrast spiritual gifts with the exercise of love. So especially—I’m—I was wrong then. I should have said, “spiritual gifts with prophecy, especially, but the more that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the Spirit, he speaks mysteries.”

You may remember that the apostle has mentioned mysteries in this epistle already a couple of times as I remember, and mysteries are secrets. They are things that would not be known by us where they not revealed to us. They are not things that Bible teachers constantly tell us, things that are mysterious. They’re not ghost stories or mysteries in the sense of the mystery hour on channel 13 on Thursday night, nine o’clock in which my wife is devoted—the mystery hour, but these are secrets. They are things that may be just ordinary things, but they are divine revelations; that is, ordinary in the sense that they may be about ordinary affairs of our lives. They are things that have not been revealed to us. So they—he speaks mysteries.

But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more you prophesy, for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues unless indeed he interprets that the church may receive edification.

While we are turning to 1 Corinthians 14—I think one of the more difficult chapters of the New Testament. And forgoing total dogmatism, which is unaccustomed to me, I’m proceeding upon

certain presuppositions, and I want you to know what they are because it’s possible that I’m not correct on some of these. Now, I didn’t have to tell you that. That’s no new information to you, but I want to say it because there may be someone who doesn’t know me and thinks that I think I do know everything. [Laughter] But these are the presuppositions. First of all, that tongues are known languages and not unknown languages, and especially that they are not ecstatic speech, not what we might call gibberish. Speaking in tongues is speaking in known languages.

And the reason that I’m following this is simply that I think it is supported by some things that are important. First of all, in support of the fact that the tongues that Paul speaks about unknown languages, is that Paul’s great companion was Luke in his travels. You know, you read the book of Acts and it details Paul’s travels as well as other facts, but Paul’s travels, on occasion, the author lapses into the “we”—in certain sections are we sections of the book of Acts, which indicates that Luke was with the individuals whom he’s describing in the particular places of the book.

So Luke is the historian of the early church, and he traveled with Paul. It’s evident from the book of Acts, that he and Paul were often together, and it seems to me that it would be very strange for Luke who wrote the book of Acts to talk about speaking in tongues and not mean the same thing that Paul means when he uses the precisely similar Greek expression.

Now, we know from Acts chapter 2 in our last study, in Acts chapter 2, verse 4, verse 6, verse 8, it’s very evident that Luke is talking about known languages. He calls them dialects even, the Greek word in verse 6 and verse 8, as I remember—I won’t take the time to look it—back to see that I’m absolutely positive of those places, at least in one of them, which makes the point, is that the word *{dialektos}*, from which we get dialect, is used there. It’s found a number of times in the book of Acts. It never means anything but a known language. And it’s very striking, I think, that many commentators who think that Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 is talking about ecstatic speech. Well, at least, acknowledge that Luke in Acts chapter 2 is talking about known languages. So there’s no question about Acts chapter 2.

I think it's reasonable—I think it's better hermeneutics to interpret the unknown by the known. And so—since this question about Acts—about 1 Corinthians 14, it sounded, in my opinion, to interpret, in the light of what we know, in Acts chapter 2 knowing the connections between Luke and the Apostle Paul. So for that reason—I think it's a major reason—I think that when Paul talks about tongues here, he's talking about known languages. There are a couple of places that make it difficult, and we'll talk about them in context when we come to them. In addition, to—to support this from the standpoint of professional linguistics, Eugene Nida, who with Kenneth Pike and Nida were probably the foremost Christian linguists. Mr. Nida was the American Bible Society's linguist. They have been occupied for many years in bringing the Bible to tribes that did not have the Bible. The Wycliffe Society was heavily indebted to those men and, in fact, many of the men who served there were taught at the schools that Kenneth Pike was involved in.

Nida analyzed, according to *Christianity Today* in articles some years ago—analyzed scores of tongues tapes and concluded that the contents were—I'm using his word that he puts—“nonsense,” having experience with the structure of languages, like so far as I know, no speaker of tongues has ever had. Linguists, of course, can tell you whether something is a language or not, generally speaking. They can listen enough to know and find a structure. They may not know the language yet, but they see the structure. He says, as he examines scores of tapes, that speaking in tongues was not lone—known languages or languages, but really “nonsense.”

Another point that I think is important is that in the Authorized Version we have the term “unknown” added frequently, if you remember speaking in unknown languages. In all of those references, there is not word for unknown. That is an interpretive addition. In other words, tongues, or languages, would be the simple rendering. Unknown was added because of the translator's conviction that they were unknown and not known. So you cannot rely upon the adjective “unknown” because there's nothing in the original text to indicate that.

It is possible, of course, that in verse 21 and 22, where the apostle quotes from the prophesy of Isaiah—verse 21 says, “In the law it is written: *‘With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to*

*this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,*” It is possible looking at that text also to surmise that we’re talking about known languages. Now, known languages as he says in verse 21, with men of other tongues, and other lips, the context is a reference to the Assyrians and their language, which will be something that Israel did not know and indicates coming judgment upon the nation Israel. So, all of those things lead me to believe that Paul is talking about known languages.

Now, proceeding on that presupposition, another thing that is important as a presupposition—but I don’t think there’s any question about this because even those who think that Paul is using a term that refers to ecstatic speech will agree with this—that the apostle’s concern in 1 Corinthians 14 is for edification. He’s specifically concerned that the Corinthians are edified by the speaking in tongues. So his—his goal is for edification. He wants to be sure that what is happening in Corinth is edifying.

The issue is intelligibility. Now, that’s very important for him as you read through here because he will say that what’s the point in speaking in a—a tongue if we are unable to understand it? In other words, if in Believers Chapel on Sunday night in our open meeting we were to have someone stand up and speak in tongues, what advantage would that give us? What information would it give us? How spiritual would it be to understand something—to hear something we cannot understand?

Some years ago I went over to Switzerland and Scotland and stayed a year from—away from the Chapel, and it was during the time that Bill McRae—it was about the time that Bill began his ministry here for three years or so. And when I came back after a year, I believe it was Mr. Prier—I don’t remember. When you get my age, things begin to become hazy, 20—20—over 20 years ago, but I believe he stood up and he welcomed me in the meeting and he said, “Would I like to say something?” Well, I thought he would probably ask me, so I was prepared.

And I made a little statement, but I made it in German. And, in effect, I said it in German, I’m sorry, but I have spent so much time in Germany, that I’ve really forgotten my English, and so I have to speak in German tonight. Well, there wasn’t anybody in the congregation that understood

except one couple sitting right up here about the fourth row who came to me and said, “We understood what you’ve said,” because they were German speakers. What would be the point in speaking in an unknown tongue if no one could understand it?

So Paul’s concern is for edification, and the issue is intelligibility. That little statement incidentally is—concern is for edification and the issue is intelligibility is a statement made by one who believes that the tongues are ecstatic speech. Now, I’m also assuming that the gift of prophecy is the ability to speak God’s Word. Now, perhaps, that’s no problem to you and—but nevertheless, I want to run through something to underline it a bit. You may remember that in Jeremiah chapter 1, Jeremiah is giving—given some words from the Lord, and he records them. In verse 4 of chapter 1,

“Then the word of the LORD came to me, (Jeremiah said) saying: ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.’ Then said I: ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I *am* a youth.’ But the LORD said to me: ‘Do not say, “I *am* a youth,” For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of their faces, For I *am* with you to deliver you,’ says the LORD. (Now, notice these words) Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: ‘Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, To root out and to pull down, To destroy and to throw down, To build and to plant.’”

The key word, “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.” A prophet is a person who speaks the Word of God, and he speaks the Word of God infallibly. There is nothing, so far as I can tell in the—in the New Testament or the Old Testament that suggests that a person is a genuine prophet when he’s speaking falsehood. Now, we have false prophets. And when he speaks something that’s not true, it identifies him as a false prophet. But prophets of the Lord spoke that

which was infallibly true. They spoke revelation. We have revelation in the Bible: Jeremiah, Isaiah, and the other of the prophetic writings.

Now, back in Exodus chapter 4, there are some verses that bear on this topic, too, and I'm going to read them because I think it's important to bear in mind just exactly what prophecy is because today there are those who claim to be able to speak prophecy in the church meetings. For them it's called frequently a word of knowledge. There is no such thing as the identification of word of knowledge. That's all we have. There's no explanation of those expressions and occurs a couple of times, word of knowledge. It would be nice if Paul had put a footnote there and it said—down at the bottom—1a word of knowledge is such and such. He didn't do that, unfortunately, so we don't know what a word of knowledge is. We may have some ideas, but we cannot be absolutely certain. There's just not enough said about it.

So today you have people saying this is a word of knowledge. The Lord has given me a word of knowledge. He said that so and so is going to happen or such and such is going to happen. But true prophecy is infallible. It comes to pass.

Now, in chapter 4 of the book of Exodus verse 10, we read these words:

“Then Moses said to the LORD, ‘O my Lord, I *am* not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I *am* slow of speech and slow of tongue.’ So the LORD said to him, ‘Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? *Have* not I, the LORD? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.’ But he said, ‘O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever *else* You may send.’”

And the Lord was a bit upset by that unbelief. He told Moses he had made the mouth. He was able to use Moses' mouth to give the words of God. Moses objected. And so there must now enter a mediator, and you remember it was Aaron. In chapter 7 in verse 1,

“So the LORD said to Moses: ‘See, I have made you *as* God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.’”

Now, we tend to think that the children of Israel were always listening for Moses’ words. As a matter of fact, many, many times, maybe most of the time, they were listening for Aaron’s words. But Aaron was giving words that were coming from Moses to whom God spoke. But notice what he says, “I have made you *as* God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet.” What’s a prophet then? A prophet is one who speaks from God. And so what he says is infallibly true. That’s why we read the prophets, and we read them today as the Word of God.

So Aaron was God’s mouth to Israel through Moses, as a matter of fact. So I’m assuming that with reference to prophecy a great deal of unusual claims are made about prophecy.

The Mormon church with all its vagaries and polygamy claims the gift of tongues. When Brigham Young came into the presence of Joseph Smith, you may remember, to whom the angel Moroni—now, you know who the angel Moroni is, he’s right on the top of the temple right over here. We have a fellow in the congregation—I think I mentioned this once, but there are a few people here probably weren’t there then—who came and put a dollar in Mr. Prier’s hands one time, that incidentally shows what he thinks of me, [laughter] but anyway, he put a—he put a dollar in Mr. Prier’s hands and he said, when the temple went up, he thought that Believers Chapel ought to have something on the top of their building to match the Mormon temple there, and he suggested that they put a statue of me up there with a five iron in my hand. [Laughter] I thought it was a brilliant suggestion, [more laughter] but it’s never been done, and I hope, incidentally, it’s never done [Johnson laughs], and I don’t think there’s a chance.

But, anyway, the angel Moroni, was the one who spoke to Jose—Joseph Smith had dug up some plates, which the world knows today as the Mormon Bible. And the angel Moroni revealed these metal plates to Joseph Smith. When—you may wonder, how did—how did they know that they were really inspired plates? I was—I think I mentioned this, too, in connection with this

sometime ago because, my mind, I’m thinking I’ve told somebody this recently, so it may be you.

One of the things old age brings upon you is, you really don’t care whether you say something twice, but you try not to, but you really don’t care [laughter].

I was Inter-Varsity leader at SMU campus for a while many, many years ago, and I had a class on the campus, and it was during the war. And we had some students who would come in on various programs at the Army or the Navy or the Air Force was carrying out, and they would have students in the class, and there was some classes in which I was teaching the Bible and these young men would come and study the Bible—and I was happy to do it for them. But one time I had a couple of Mormons who were in the class, and they attended fairly regularly, and they listened to me for a good while, and then, finally, we had a—a—distinguishing conversation in which we finally got down to the differences between us. And I remember saying to one of the young men—and we are down around something that’s like the cistern, right in the front of—right in the middle of the old buildings of SMU. And I said, “Well, just tell me why you think the Mormon Bible is inspired.”

Well, he was unable to do that. He didn’t—he didn’t have much understanding of the Bible at all, but he had a Mormon Bible in his hand. So he quickly said, wait a minute, and he was looking it up. He had the equivalent of the Scofield Bible, except it was a Mormon Bible. And he could look up answers to questions that people were asking. This was a question that, obviously, been asked—and so he looked it up and he said, well, Isaiah chapter 29, verse 4 because the—Moroni had told Joseph Smith that these plates had been—which we dug out of the ground—were inspired and to find support for it, Isaiah 29:4 was used,

“You shall be brought down, You shall speak out of the ground; Your speech shall be low, out of the dust; Your voice shall be like a medium’s, out of the ground; And your speech shall whisper out of the dust.”

So he said, there it is. It says—the prophecy says something’s going to be dug out of the ground, and it will be the voice of God.

I said, you haven’t read that very well. It so happened, I think providentially, I read that text recently—so I was immediately on top of it. I said, “Did you know that—do you know what a medium is?”—I’ve forgotten what the Authorized Version has, but it says something similar—I said, “Do you know what that is?”

He said, “No, I don’t.”

I said, that’s—that’s a false. That’s a false—that’s a demonic person. The text you are using is a demonic text. Oh, he was really crushed at that. [Laughter] And that was one argument I won.

Well, coming back now to the question of speaking in tongues. When the angel Moroni—when Brigham Young came into the presence of Joseph Smith, to whom the angel Moroni had revealed these metal plates, which are the Mormon Bible, Brigham Young began to speak in tongues, so the Mormon church says. And this is the evidence, they claim, that the plates that Joseph Smith dug up at the urging of angel Moroni at his light. They are inspired. Smith was a prophet—he was later, as you remember, assassinated or killed, murdered—and furthermore, that Mormonism is right. I always thought this was a wonderful kind of thing, that we should have a religious movement founded on Brigham Smith [sic] speaking in tongues when he came into the presence of Joseph Smith in the light of what the Bible says about the tongues. Think of a denomination founded on the tongues.

James says about the tongues, “The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity, so is the tongue among our members that it defiled the whole body and setteth on fire the course of nature and it set on fire of hell. So here is a religious organization of over three million members, now scattered over this country and really over the world, and founded upon a tongue. Oh, I know that wouldn’t go too well with them, but that’s the way I look at it.

What do Mormons believe? Well, they believe that God is not a spiritual being, God has a father, has a body. He has a body of flesh and bones just like you have a body of flesh and bones.

There are many gods in addition to the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. The Gods were once men, and men may become gods in the world to come if one observes faithfully Mormon teaching. As one of the early Mormon pres—presidents said, Lorenzo Snow, he summed it up this way: “As man is, God once was; as God is, man may become. Man is preexistent, existing as spirits before coming to this earth.” Justification by faith alone which we celebrate at the time of the Reformation this time of the year, justification by faith alone is a pernicious doctrine, which is exercised and influenced for evil. One is saved by faith in Christ, plus faith in Joseph Smith, but especially saved through works.

The entire Christian church, so Mormons claim, was apostate until 1830. And then was restored under the leadership of Joseph Smith, who is responsible for Brigham Young speaking in tongues. Baptism, of course, is necessary for salvation. All of these things are in the Mormon church. And, yet, the Mormon church has as one of its doctrinal statements, We believe in speaking in tongues. Why am I saying all of this? Because I think there are a lot of people who think that if you believe in speaking in tongues, that means, of course, you are sound in the faith. You belong to the evangelical company. That, of course, is not true.

Well, now, coming to our text because it's short passage this evening, the apostle exhorts the Corinthians again with reference to love and the gifts and makes the proper distinction. He says, pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. There are no connecting particles here between verse 4—chapter 14 in verse—chapter 13 and so we probably have to go back to the end of chapter 12 where in verse 31, the Apostle had written, “But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.” And now, again, he picks it up after the—the interlude with Christian love. Pursue love, desire spiritual gifts. He has said, remember, in chapter 13 that love belongs to a higher category than spiritual gifts.

In other words, the spiritual gifts, it's great to pursue or follow spiritual gifts as he says here, desire them, but love belongs to a higher category. The spiritual activity and condition in which love is to be exercised may include spiritual gifts, but the important thing is Christian love. That is more significant. It's a higher category than being occupied with spiritual gifts in the first place.

H. A. Ironside has some interesting words to say on the fleshly display of gifts, and I think it would be good for us to listen to him. He says, “In the church of God as a whole and in the assembly of believers gathered together as a worshipping company”—that’s what we are, particularly on Sunday night in Believers Chapel—“there is no place for mere fleshly displayed. If I am gifted of God in measure in preaching the gospel, I’m not take advantage of that to exhibit my abilities ostentatiously or to gather people about myself. If I have been gifted of God to sing a fine old gospel song that people enjoy hearing so much, I’m not to use that talent to attract attention to myself or to my voice, but I’m to use it to give out a message which winged my melody will move human hearts that the spoken word might not reach.”

If I should be gifted of God to teach the Holy Scriptures, I’m not to take advantage of the gift in order to exercise people’s minds about strange and perplexing problems, which would make them think, perhaps, that I am a more deeply taught man than most, but I am to make things as plain and simply as possible in order that the saints may receive edification. This is the standard for using the gifts that God has given, are all to be exercised in love. That, I think, is a very good statement.

So he says, pursue love. It’s the word that’s sometimes used that means to persecute. So it means to pursue and pursue in an earnest way, pursue love. At the same time, desire spiritual gifts, earnest the desire of spiritual gifts, strive for spiritual gifts, but remember that spiritual gifts are given sovereignly. There is no promise in the Word of God that if I should pray that I might have the gift of exhortation, that I would ever have it. I may get down upon my knees and ask the Lord constantly, “Lord, give me the gift of exhortation.” But those gifts are given sovereignly. His word is final. They are not given as a result of prayer. They are sovereignly given. He gives them out as he wills. We’ve already read about that in chapter 21 of the epistle. So it’s great to desire spiritual gifts, but it’s important to remember that they are given by the sovereign determination of God.

Now, Paul says, pursue love, desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. And here, of course, he has in mind the fact that prophecy, in his mind, has a much more excellent gift than speaking in tongues. So specially that you may prophesy. I have a question here. When he says,

“especially that you may prophesy,” does he mean the whole church, or does he mean some in the church, speaking in the general sense? You, that is you members of the church, as God sovereignly gives the gift. I think that that’s probably what he has in mind. So especially that you may prophesy.

The apostle, by the way, as you can tell from going through 1 Corinthians in some matters, like the matters of asceticism and the matter of limitarianism, as in the matter of speaking in tongues, he goes as far as he can with those whom he criticizes before interposing a caveat. Now, that is evident when he talks about indifferent things, back in chapter 8 through chapter 10. The entire drift of the argument of 1 Corinthians 12 through 14 is that there are certain things that are permitted, but, nevertheless, the apostle does not feel they ought to be emphasized. And we can see that with tongues.

It’s obvious that while he’s willing to acknowledge that tongues is a spiritual gift, he doesn’t think it should be emphasized. Now, there are organizations that emphasize this gift. The apostle’s words are plainly against them and, incidentally, the volume that I was reading written by a charismatic, a charismatic scholar—I must say, I’m not being mean when I say that’s, I think, one of the truly Charismatic scholars, he acknowledges that. He says that’s very true. Just exactly what I’ve told you.

F. F. Bruce has an interesting quotation. He quotes Henry Chadwick, a British historian who says this: “The entire drift of the argument of 1 Corinthians 12 through 14 is such as to pour a douche of ice cold water over the whole practice. A poet could hardly have denied that the gift of tongues was a genuine, supernatural *charisma* without putting a fatal barrier between himself and the Corinthian enthusiast.” So he acknowledges there is a gift of speaking in tongues. But the whole thrust of the chapter is prophecy is much better, and that is what we should long to have.

Now, the reasons for the superiority of prophecy follow in verse 2 through verse 4, listen to what he has to say. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands for he’s speaking mysteries.” And so the value of speaking in tongues for the congregation is minimal. Hidden truth shared only by God and the speaker.

Now, there is another important thing in connection with this that I think supports that. How many New Testament epistles are there? Aren't there about twenty-one New Testament epistles? They were messages given by the apostles to the Christian church generally for their day—to—day living, doctrinally and practically, twenty-one New Testament epistles. How many of them mention the gift of tongues? How many? One. This epistle. This is the only one that mentions the gift of tongues.

So I think from that very fact, you could see that Paul launching out into an explanation saying that he who speaks in a tongue, does not speak to men, but to God, for no one understand him, so therefore, especially long for the gift of prophecy. That's thoroughly Pauline.

He goes on to say in verse 3 and verse 4, But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. The one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself. At a moment he will say “unless interprets” if he should happen, also, to have the gift of interpretation because that's a special gift, too. Then, of course, he can turn his tongue speaking into prophetic teaching. In that case, of course, he's speaking something that is, therefore, understood.

Now, we know from what has told us so often about prophets that prophets are ministers of the triune God who have at least two kinds of ministry. To put it very simply in words that are often used so that you can remember them, prophets foretell and forth tell. That is, prophets prophesy with reference to the future and prophets also, simply give out the Word of God as it pertains to a local situation as it touches Christians' or believers' lives. So they both foretell and they both—they both tell forth as well as foretell.

One interesting thing about modern prophets, though, is that modern prophets do not foretell much. Have you noticed that, those who have claimed the gift of prophecy? How many of them have prophesied what's going to happen in the future? They generally avoid that. Do you know why? Because they don't know. They don't know.

Now—in case you say, I do know something, yes, I know some. There is one very well known signs-and-wonders prophet who this summer made a prophecy. He said that, I believe the month of August is one of the months in there—I think about sometime during the month of August—God would rip out evil from his world. And so we waited through the days of August, those of us who heard about the prophecy. We waited. When is it going to happen? And so when August 31st came and past, then we waited for the explanation. Well, the explanation is, well, it didn’t happen on earth. It happened in heaven some way probably. So prophets today avoid foretelling. They love to forth tell, that is to say they had a word of knowledge about this, a word of knowledge about that.

Now, they’re not the only ones, the signs and wonders folk. They’re not the only ones. There’s a Reformed man, well-known to some in the congregation. When I mention his name, you’re going to know him. Harold Camping. Harold Camping is a good man. He owns a number of radio stations, Christian radio stations. He normally publishes Christian—or broadcasts Christian things that are true to the Word of God. As a matter of fact, even some of our tapes have been on some of his stations. Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in Askelon; lest the uncircumcised Arminians hear, but he’s a Calvinist. And he prophesied that the Lord would come during the month of September, 1994, just recently. You know about that, don’t you? If you don’t know about it, where have you been? Among Christians, certainly he’s prophesied. We waited expectantly for those days, but when September the 30th past, well, from that we learned that Mr. Camping, he may be a good teacher of the Word, earnest Christian seeking the lost, not a prophet. He is a false prophet. And all of the others who made prophecies like that that don’t come to pass.

What is prophecy? Well, Paul says, verse 3, he who prophesies speaks edification. Now, I suggest to you that edification here means doctrinal truth. That is a truth that builds us up. I’m not going to say it excludes Christian life truth, but Christian life truth, in the final analysis, is doctrinal truth, too, isn’t it? When the Bible talks about our Christian lives and exhorts us with reference to them, those are passages in which God’s revelation is given to us. So edification—I think it’s

primarily doctrinal truth that he’s talking about and so the person who thinks that doctrine is not important, well, he hasn’t been in Believers Chapel very long, but nevertheless, it’s something that we need to avoid saying.

Is it true that Christians love darkness more than light and that Christianity thrives best where it’s least understood? No, of course not. Christianity thrives where it’s understood and where the words of the Holy Scriptures are words that set forth doctrinal truths that we believe and that we hope we are in harmony with. That’s important. Every text in the Bible is a doctrinal text. Genesis 1:1, in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, theology. Theology. So many people today—I hear it so often—not interested in theology. We’re interested in life. We’re not interested in theology. We’re interested in the person of Jesus Christ. But who was Jesus Christ? And, thus, theology comes again in the mouths of those who say they’re not interested in theology. Edification.

Verse 4, verse 5, notice how he speaks with reference to it. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification. I’m not—I don’t have time to turn to the passages in this epistle where edification is referred to, but edification, doctrinal truth.

Then exhortation, verse 3, he who prophesies, speaks edification and exhortation. Why do we have exhortation? I think Dr. Ironside put it in a beautiful little phrase, because we Christians are so apt to slumber. How true that is. We are so apt to slumber, and we listen to the expositions of the Word of God of which we ought to, but then it’s not long before we—because we still have the same principle within us, read Romans 7, we start to slumber spiritually, and we do not pay attention to the question of our—how harmonious our Christian life is with the things that are set forth in the Word of God.

Prophecy then, the apostle states, is that which has to do with edification and exhortation. We need such. There is a gift of exhortation. It would be wonderful if in Believers Chapel, we had some people who were moved by the Spirit of God to pray. Oh, God, give me the gift of exhortation

because we need just that—kind of constant reminder of the necessity to respond to the Word of God. We are so apt to slumber, and we got some slumberers in Believers Chapel. If you don’t think we have, come to me because I slumber, and I’ll confirm my own statement, if that’s possible, legally.

Thirdly, we read, He—verse 3, “But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.”

Corinthians—I think the Corinthians were evangelicals of the 20th century. The Corinthians like the showy things. I think if the Corinthians had known about rock music, that’s the kind of music they would have had in their congregation. They would have had that kind of music. Christian rock would have been something they would have gone for, because that’s the kind of mentality that they had. They liked the things that were showy. They were the things that excel—they were the ones who excelled in the spiritual gifts. Paul said they had gifts more than anybody else, so they would have all of that. Paul says he prefers prophecy and prophecy edifies. And it’s composed of edification, exhortation, and comfort. We always have people who need comfort in the local church. There are people who have lost loved ones. There are people who have had difficulties in their business. There are those who are having trials in their personal lives. There are those who are in the midst of family difficulties and sometimes family squabbles, and they do need the ministry of comfort.

Joseph Parker, one of the great London preachers of a generation or two back, said to some young theologs that he was lecturing, “Always preach to broken hearts and you will never lack for an audience.” That is part of prophecy, too.

Now, finally, in verse 5, this is a kind of a summary and a conclusion. The Apostle writes, “I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive exhortation.” Prophecy fills up the whole assembly and therefore, the prophet is greater on the one who speaks in tongues. The greatness of the prophet has its source in the fact that he is a better, a greater, servant of the Lord. One of the commentators talking about this says that the source of this

better servanthood is the thing that our Lord Jesus talks about in Mark chapter 10, when he speaks to them as apostles in this way. He said to them, “You know that those considered rulers over the Gentiles, lorded over them and their great ones exercised authority over them, that it shall not be so among you. But whosoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant and whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all, for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesy, for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, is something about a ministry of the Word in prophecy that does remind us of our Lord giving himself as a servant for us.

Now, notice he says, also, in verse 5 in the last line that the church may receive edification. The word “church” in here has the article; the church that occurs up above doesn’t have the article. Here the article, the church, and so a church receives edification when the prophet prophesies. And if he prophesies with the aim in mind of edifying the church, God blesses that ministry. And even the person who speaks in tongues, if he should have the gift of interpretation, that would turn his own tongues statements into prophecy and thus edification would result, so the apostle states.

We’re finishing a little early tonight. I know you would never believe that that is possible, but it is possible. Let’s bow in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the opportunity to study the Scriptures. We ask again for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, pray that as we ponder this epistle, the things that the epistle speaks through our situation today, almost two thousand years later, may be things that we reflect upon and then by Thy grace we may become more harmonious in our church life and in our individual life with the Word of God.

We thank Thee for the ministry of the apostle to us. And we ask, Lord, that Thy will go with us for those of us who need comfort that we may have comfort, for those of us who need exhortation to be stirred to give ourselves more fully to the will of God in our lives that we may be

“The Superiority of Prophecy to Tongues,” by S. Lewis Johnson  
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able to do that. And for those of us who simply need edification to grow, Lord, may that be our  
experience as well.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.