

Xplore Prophecy

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Preacher: Peter Adam

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 22nd of August 2004.

The preacher is Peter Adlam. His sermon is entitled Explore Prophecy and is based on 1 Corinthians chapter 14.

Great, well thanks for having me here tonight. It's great to come and speak here. I'm a good friend of Steve's and Steve came down and spoke at my church a couple of months ago and sort of returned the favour tonight.

So it's great to be amongst you. Well, what were your expectations about coming to church tonight? When it came to 6, 6.30 and you decided that, yes, we're coming to church tonight, what were you hoping for?

What were you expecting? I hope you weren't expecting a service like that of Mr. Bean. Boring sermons? Hard songs to sing?

[1 : 04] No relevance in your life? No young people? What were you actually expecting when you decided that you were going to come to church tonight? What were you expecting to receive?

Did you expect to be entertained? Did you expect to hear a good sermon? Sorry about that. Did you expect good music? Praise. What did you expect to give tonight?

Did you expect to share or use some of your spiritual gifts tonight? Did you bring an offering? Did you bring some words of encouragement to other people?

What were your expectations about coming to church here tonight? Did you expect God to be here tonight? Did you expect Him to be here in an immediate or an experiential way?

Or did you expect Him to be in some less tangible way? Perhaps you didn't expect Him to turn up at all. What were your expectations here about coming to church tonight?

[2 : 15] Why don't you just close your eyes for a minute and just have one more think about it. What were you expecting to receive? What were you expecting to give?

How did you expect to experience God here tonight? We'll come back to that at the end. There's a couple of models that are floating around the church today.

Two very, very common models about how people understand church. And the first is what I call the performance model. In this model, we come together and we hear great songs from a great band and the ones up the front are leading us and they perform to us.

We're the audience and they're the performers. Have you ever seen a Hillsong DVD? That's what I'm talking about. Song leaders or worship leaders aim to lead people into God's presence.

Somehow through the music and the praise and the worship, God turns up and we break into God's presence. That's how that is understood of what's going on. If that's what church is, if that performance model is right, then we can expect God to be kind of really immediate to us, really experiential.

[3 : 35] God's right here and we'll experience Him so long as we have the right worship through the songs. Let me think about that model, performance model. That's the first one.

There's another model, the professional model. In this model, we come together and we have professionals come to do all the important bits of the service.

We hire them to do the ministry. And that's how the church has operated for centuries, you'd have to say. You pay a minister and he or she does the ministry.

You want good quality, so you try to hire the best you can. You search out there, get the most godly, gifted leaders you can and then you install them and then they do their bit.

The professional will do sermons for you that are letter perfect. They'll tell you all what the scholars say. But in reality, most of the stuff might actually go over your head.

[4 : 37] Probably goes over my head too. And you're left thinking, what was all that about? I know there's something really important there, but what was that all about? What was God trying to tell me here tonight?

The professional church will be a church of high quality. It's a church you could boast about. You know, we did this, our church, we've got all these ministries. But you'll actually never do any ministry yourself.

That's what church is. If we just listen to what the professionals tell us to do and say, then we're actually not going to do very much at all.

We'll just wait until we hear what they think we should do with our lives. That's a professional model. Performance model, professional model.

Do they satisfy you? More importantly, are they biblical models of ministry? Do you see them in the church today? Tonight I want to suggest to you a third model.

[5 : 41] That's no surprise, is it? I want to suggest a third model that comes straight out of the teaching of Paul's letter in 1 Corinthians. It's what I call the participation model.

It starts with P, so I just had to get that. I'm going to read 1 Corinthians 14, 1 to 5. Can we have that up on the screen? Yeah. Oh, brilliant.

Okay. Let me just read that to you again. Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God.

Indeed, no one understands him. He utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

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

[6 : 47] So what can we expect when the church meet together? What does Paul say? What's the point? Well, Paul says that we should be able, we should expect to be able to participate in strengthening, encouraging and comforting each other.

Have a look at that verse 3 again. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He wants us to build each other up when we meet together.

In fact, he doesn't only want you and you and you and you and you to be built up, individuals. He wants the whole church to be built up or edified. Verse 5.

He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. All of the people of God. Paul's clear expectation here is that people will be strengthened in their faith, will be encouraged by their meeting together, and they'll be sharing the gifts that God has given them.

Paul's expectation is that people will participate in building one another up. It's not participation for participation's sake. There's a bit about that in the various teaching professions at the moment.

[8 : 01] Participation's good, we must do it, and it's almost for its own sake. No. Paul's clear, it's participation so that we can build up the body. Paul uses these two supernatural gifts to kind of illustrate his point.

He talks about prophecy and about speaking in tongues. Now, these gifts might sound a bit weird. I'm just going to ask you to hang in with me, and we're just going to make sure that people understand what these two gifts are before we trace through his argument.

But firstly, prophecy. Prophecy is when someone is prompted by God to speak a message from God to us. In the Old Testament, prophets were appointed by God to regularly give out messages to the people.

I've got to tell you, it wasn't a great job. Most of the time, more often or not, God's people had done the wrong thing, and they had to bring words of judgment to the people, telling them to get on with it and get back on track.

The prophets said, this is what the Lord says, and they'd say it. And you could always tell if a prophet was dodgy or not if what he said didn't come true.

[9 : 10] In the New Testament, prophecy works a little bit differently, I guess. In Acts chapter 2, when the Holy Spirit comes in fulfillment of the prophecy from Joel, every believer, man and woman, old and young, can speak words of prophecy.

In the New Testament, these words of prophecy seem to be a spontaneous thing. It's something that's tested, as we see later on, by the words of the Bible, weighed up.

It's kind of not exactly the same as a sermon. It's sort of like a sermon, but it's sort of different. Sermons are kind of pre-prepared. Prophecy isn't. It's more immediate.

But of course, there are some similarities. They're both bringing God's word to people. They're both trying to help us to grow in our knowledge and love of Christ. So there we have it. Prophecy is a spontaneous word from God that's there to build up others.

We'll have you looking at that later in the passage. Okay, for prophecy for the moment. Speaking in tongues. Well, speaking in tongues is something that's loved in some parts of the church and despised in others.

[10 : 17] It's kind of one of those things that has divided the church over the years. I was on the internet and I was in a chat room and I heard this person say about this whole topic.

I read it out to us. Well, I've heard people speak in tongues and it sounded a lot like nonsense syllables to me. So I'm not much sure how much of a gift it is. If you're talking about people speaking language they're not supposed to know, that's rather different from what I've experienced.

But what I think about these kinds of things is that without hard data, exact accounts and verifiability, these sorts of stories don't mean much. I'm not saying I think you're making anything up.

I trust that you're reporting what appears to you to be the truth. But everyone's biased in some way or another. Well, speaking in tongues might sound like nonsense syllables, but it's not.

Paul's quite clear that it's real communication by the person and God. It helps the person to be able to communicate their feelings and their thoughts to God in a way other than normal words.

[11 : 19] Have a look at verse 2. He says, It's real communication between humans and God.

Indeed, no one understands him. He utters mysteries with his spirit. It actually does help the person involved. It builds them up. Verse 4, Paul says, He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.

Speaking in tongues is real communication between a person and God. It's just on a different kind of level. Okay for that one? We can pick up Paul's argument again now.

So Paul's making the point in these first five verses that the aim for these two gifts is massively different. On the one hand you've got speaking in tongues, which is about your own relationship to God.

It's about you being strengthened and encouraged and comforted. And on the other hand you've got prophecy, which is about building others up. It's about your relationship together.

[12 : 19] It's about building up the whole church and strengthening the whole church. Paul kind of summarizes this in verse 5. He says, I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophecy.

He says, He says, He says, He says, He says, He says, So that the church may be edified. So the whole church gets built up.

He's saying that when we meet together, we've got to do stuff that builds each other up. Coming to church isn't about getting a buzz for me or for you. Although we might get a buzz.

But that's not the reason that we come. Now I haven't heard of HTD that we've got a massive problem with tongue speaking here. And that you're all talking over the top of each other.

And it's just a mess. Alright? So why are we talking about this passage here tonight? That seems to be happening what's happening here. Well, it's because our culture is totally driven by what's relevant to me.

[13 : 21] What's good for me. This passage actually couldn't be more relevant. It's so easy to slip into the thinking that I'm a church here for me.

I'm a church so that I can be built up. I can be fed. I can do these things. Rather than thinking about me being here for you. Coming to a church because it's got good Bible teaching isn't a good enough reason to come to church.

You know that, don't you? You need a better reason to come to church than that. And the better reason is so that you can be built up and you can build others up.

It's something much bigger than something just that you're going to personally receive. If your primary reason is to come for you, you'll always be disappointed. Because they'll never always play your favourite song.

They'll never have your favourite preacher up here every week. You'll never have the best video clip. You'll always want the next episode. You always want something else. Church will never quite hit the mark.

[14 : 29] But if your primary reason for coming here is actually to build others up, you'll find that you don't even realise they didn't do your favourite song. You won't even realise.

Because you're here for someone else. But you might be thinking, is it wrong to want to buzz? Is it wrong when you come to church to actually want to experience something of God, a deeper personal experience?

Of course not. Paul says, of course not. It's just that that's not the primary reason that you come to church. I want to read out from verse 13 to 19.

Paul says this. He says, For this reason, anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

So what shall I do? I'll pray with my spirit, but I'll also pray with my mind. I'll sing with my spirit, but I'll also sing with my mind. If you're praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who don't understand say, Amen to your thanksgiving?

[15 : 40] He doesn't understand what you're saying. You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. The other person isn't built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

But in the church, when we meet together, I'd rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand in a tongue. Hear me right here.

Paul's not putting down personal experience. He's not at all. No way. He's not putting down speaking in tongues. He means it when he says that he thanks God that he speaks in tongues more than everyone.

It's a gift that God has given him to use. It's just that that's not the primary reason that he comes to church.

When he comes to church, he wants to build others up. A couple of years ago, I started speaking in tongues. And I prayed for the gift about ten years previous, and suddenly it just sort of happened.

[16 : 41] I was more freaked out than anyone on the planet, I think. But it's just a gift that God's given me to use. I don't use it at church. Except when I'm really nervous out the back and I'm just about to preach or something like that.

If you'd like that gift, then that's something that you can ask God to use when you go home tonight. It's one of the many gifts that God gives us to build us up. Developing your own relationship with God is a great thing.

And we need to do it. And it's probably best done when we set aside time ourselves in our own space, where we can get together and get the word out.

Maybe hear a Christian song and just start praying. I actually personally find that the Psalms are a great place to be. Whenever I'm feeling particularly low or particularly high, I always go to the Psalms, because they seem to meet me just where I'm at and help me to pray.

But when we meet at church, this personal experience isn't the issue. The focus should be on building others up in God's presence. And the interesting thing is it's actually just the same for when non-Christians are there too.

[17 : 56] Paul says, if a non-Christian comes in and comes to our gathering and they see us speak in tongues, they'll think, you guys are crazy. You guys are out of your mind. But when they hear a word of prophecy or direct teaching, this is the result.

Verse 25. The secrets of his heart will be laid bare and he'll fall down and worship God, proclaiming God's really among you. So if I drill that point home enough, we're here to mutually encourage each other, to build each other up in God's presence.

Okay. Well, then I want to ask, what does God actually expect? What does Paul expect will happen when Christians actually meet together? What should our meeting actually look like?

Well, Paul's got a little running sheet for his service here in verse 26. Let me read it to you. It's not quite as detailed as the running sheets I do. I used to do running sheets even with timed things on the side.

Not quite the same as that. Let me read. What shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.

[19 : 07] And all of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. Now, it's clear that this isn't an exhaustive running sheet. But it does give us an idea about what Paul expects Christians to do when they gather together.

I want you to look at that word, everyone. You see that there? When you come together, everyone. Everyone has something to contribute, to bring.

Everyone has something that they can use to build up others. It's high participation. It's not a performance. It's not a show with actors up the front and audience out there.

It's certainly not a professional outfit with the experts that you'll wheel in to teach the plebs. It's genuine participation, isn't it? If the Holy Spirit gives gifts to God's people, then we're expected to use them.

We're expected to use them to build God's people up. And if we're to use them, we need space, don't we? Do we need space in a service to be able to actually use them?

[20 : 18] Paul's running sheet is not very tight. It's not nearly as tight as the ones I produce for church at my place. It's pretty vague. It's pretty loose.

But Paul does go on and give a few guidelines, which will be really helpful for us in thinking about how we ought to run our gatherings together. Verse 27, 28, Paul says, If anyone speaks in a tongue, two or at most three should speak one at a time, and someone must interpret.

If there's no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. So speaking in tongues in church is okay, but there's got to be an interpreter, someone who is there, who is so that everyone can be encouraged.

There's no room for individuals just doing their own thing in their own little world. He's saying, it's about us together, guys. And in verse 29, he says, Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.

And if a revelation comes to someone who's sitting down, the first speaker should stop. They should shut up. For you can all prophesy in turn, so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.

[21 : 32] The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder, but of peace. Paul's saying here that there's no room for someone hogging the limelight, or the microphone in this case.

Two or three people who've got a word from God can speak, and once they've done, then the elders, the leaders, can weigh up and make sure, test it against God's word. It's got to be done in an orderly way, so people can be encouraged.

He says, The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. In other words, the words that come out when you're prophesying, you can control them. So, when you've stopped, shut up. Control it.

Often today, we have a sermon. A pre-prepared sermon. And a teacher puts lots of work into preparing something for you. On average, it takes me about 12 hours, something like that.

That's a great thing. I've heard that you've got some really good preachers here at Holy Trinity Doncaster. You should really thank God for that. But there's a danger, you know, of having great sermons every week.

[22 : 43] Because we can learn to expect that God only speaks through pre-prepared, ordered, clear logical thought processes. And we can begin to think that God is limited in the way in which He can speak to us.

We, in fact, can hedge God in and box Him. And we begin to go down that professional model of church. And we devalue the gifts, the God-given gifts that we have.

It's almost like we can muzzle God by not allowing other Christians to speak a word from God. Of course, it can be a very confronting thing to do.

And ministers up the front or the leaders, the service leaders, can lose a lot of control. And that's scary. Scary for me when I do it. What if some wacko gets up here and starts saying all this crazy stuff?

People come up after me and I'll have to pay for it. But if we take this passage seriously, we'll actually need to create space for people in our services, for people in our small groups, to be able to share what God's been up to.

[23 : 58] We need to allow freedom for people to be able to bring a word or a revelation to us. We need to give people permission to actually share. So what does that look like in practice?

Well, I don't know how many people are here tonight. Let's just say 100 for a minute. Say 100. It's going to be hard if every time you meet together in an evening service, that you have space for everyone to speak.

That's going to be difficult. It's going to be real tough. So it might be easier if you guys talk about these things in your small groups. But there's something uncomfortable about that for me because there's something about our corporate gathering together, our identity together, that means that there should be an opportunity for us to be able to share on a deeper level with the whole church.

You're not all going to be able to say something every week. But surely there should be an opportunity, Paul's envisaging an opportunity, for people to genuinely be able to participate on a regular basis.

I'm not sure quite how that would work at Holy Trinity Doncaster. But that's something for you to work out yourselves. Let me tell you about what it looks like in our church in Geelong.

[25 : 17] Last month we invited some people to speak about what God had been doing in people's lives, things that God had been teaching them or ways in which God had been guiding them. And I was up the front, I was leading the service, and I was thinking, I hope someone, at least one person, gets up and says something, because I'm going to be really embarrassed if they don't.

Because in the past, you know, a few of the older people got up and said something, and that was great. But it kind of wasn't the point. The way in which we run our evening service in Hyten is that we really base it for our youth and our young adults because the adults really serve well in the mornings.

And we want some older people there to mentor the youth and the young adults, so we really enjoy having them in the night. But it's pitched squarely at the youth and the young adults. But then one by one, all these people just started to come up and share things.

They weren't all really, really clear, logical thought processes well prepared. But I tell you what, every one of them I knew that God had been working in their lives. One girl shared about her grandfather is dying and how she's dealing with that and processing that and how the Psalms have been helpful for her in crying out to God.

One guy talked about how his dad was dying and how he'd been sharing his faith with his dad. One person spoke about how she hadn't been to church for four weeks and she'd just realised how much she'd missed it and missed the fellowship of each other.

[26 : 40] And she sat down. One person spoke about how God had been guiding him in his work. It was just fantastic. I was just blown away. And I didn't realise that people were so busting their guts to actually be able to share.

I came back to this passage, because we've been preaching on this, and I realised this is exactly what Paul's talking about. It's not about a performance. It's not about a professional's doing the job.

It's about genuine participation. And for the rest of that service, yeah, we had a sermon. It was great. Yeah, we had some songs. It was great.

I think it was a balanced service. But there was a real opportunity for people to be able to bring something and share it. I've been through a lot tonight.

I've been trying to challenge you right throughout tonight to ask yourself what it is that you expect to have happen when you come to church.

[27 : 44] Do you expect to be entertained by some people up the front? Do you expect a professional to come and tell you what you should do and what you should know and how you should act?

Or do you come here to participate expecting that God's going to turn up? I reckon I was a Christian for years before I realised that Christian gatherings was meant to be a place where God was going to turn up.

I thought it was totally about a horizontal thing where we came and shared different things. And suddenly I realised it was actually asking God to encourage us deeply in our spirits and to meet with us.

Sometimes that doesn't look very supernatural at all. But sometimes in our gatherings when someone has a word that they want to share Paul envisages that we should be able to be able to share that and mutually build up and encourage one another and edify the church.

He says Washington with us whether he can PDG