

CONDUCT IN WORSHIP
1 Corinthians 14:26-40
May 28, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

This morning we come to the conclusion of our survey on spiritual gifts, in particular tongues and prophecy. But we also come to a conclusion on Paul's entire theme in 1 Corinthians. If there was one word that described the church at Corinth, it was disunity. As we have seen over the past months, there were many things that lent to this division: emphasizing the worldly wisdom and clever speech of leaders in the church, focusing on non-essential issues and secondary things other than Christ crucified, a lack of church discipline, exercising of liberties at the expense of the spiritually immature, misunderstanding and abuse of the church ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and misuse and abuse of spiritual gifts. Each and every one of these things showed up when the church at Corinth met for public worship. Yes, the church was a mess. But this mess could be straightened out, the disunity could be overcome and the church could glorify God and Christ, if the Corinthians would remember one simple principle for worship: *There must be orderly conduct in worship for all worshippers to receive spiritual benefit.*

I. Order in Worship (14:26-35)

“What is the outcome then, brethren? (“What then shall we say?” (NIV); “What then?” (ESV); “What practical considerations should we have from the preceding discussion?”) Specifically, given the truth that the Corinthians were to eagerly desire prophecy over tongues, how was this applied in the public worship setting? The simple answer is found in v. 40, **“All things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.”** The Corinthians thought that the more unorganized a worship service was, the better. For them, the more confusion there was the more evidence that the Holy Spirit was present. Paul counters this by showing that there must be order in worship because God is a God of order, not confusion (v. 33a). God's order is demonstrated throughout Scripture – from Genesis 1 and the story of creation right through the redemptive history of mankind until the consummation of all things at the Lord's return.

Paul begins to define this order in worship more clearly by giving the general policy that when assembling together, each one should come ready to exercise their spiritual gifts. **“When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation.”** This list, while not exhaustive, demonstrates Paul's point that there should be no bystanders in worship. All should come ready to use their gifts “for the common good” (12:7) and for the **“edification”** of others. Every believer is called to be an edifier, one who builds up rather than tears down. In the Greek it literally means “house builder.” Paul demonstrated this in other places as well.

Romans 15:2-3 – Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. For even Christ did not please Himself

1 Thessalonians 5:11 – Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.

We must remember that the Corinthians were perhaps some of the most selfish people to whom Paul wrote. This entire letter has demonstrated their self-centeredness. They were far from what Paul wrote in Romans 14:9, “We pursue the things which make for peace and the building

up of one another.” So Paul sets forth this general principle that all must come ready to use their gifts in worship, which serves as a conclusion to all that he has said concerning spiritual gifts.

Paul applied this general principle to three main issues that were disruptive influences to orderly worship at Corinth.

1. The issue of tongues (vv. 27-28)

As we have seen in chapters 12-14, tongues represented the main difficulty at Corinth in public worship. So Paul begins with tongues as the first disruptive issue and gives four restrictions to the gift of tongues in public worship.

(1) It should be by two or at the most three (v. 27)

In the entire congregation, as gathered together on the Lord’s Day, in the event that **“anyone speaks in a tongue”** it was to be by no more than three people, and preferably no more than two. This is in the entire congregation in any one service.

This one restriction calls into question the practice in Pentecostal circles today. Many believe that if you do not speak in tongues then you do not have the Spirit and consequently have not worshiped. Much like these at Corinth, every person should have the gift of tongues and use them on every occasion to verify that they are spiritual. Paul says this is simply not true. Even in his setting, when tongues did exist, they were to be considered a lesser gift as he showed in the opening verses of this chapter.

Further, even if you disagree with the cessationist view that the gift of tongues have ceased to exist today, you would have to agree that tongues as they are demonstrated in most instances today go well beyond this restriction. We may agree to disagree on whether tongues at Corinth and today are ecstatic utterances or other languages. But whatever the case, when we examine the exercise of tongues in the Pentecostal church today, we see that they abuse the gift much like these at Corinth. When you place this single restriction on their use of tongues in corporate worship, we see a blatant usurping of the authority of Scripture. Paul is clear, two, no more than three, are to exercise this gift in a single service.

(2) Each in turn (v. 27)

Not only was there to be two, at the most three, who speak in tongues, but they were to do so one at a time, not simultaneously as they were accustomed to doing. When most of them spoke in tongues at the same time, there was confusion and the language was unintelligible. Think about this for a moment. Even if they spoke in the same tongue, if all spoke at the same time know one could understand everyone at the same time. Think of your own household. Even if only two or three are speaking at the same time, it is often difficult to understand what each is saying. But imagine almost every person in the congregation speaking different languages at the same time. This would be flat out bedlam. **“Each in turn”** brought order and understanding.

Again, this is an indictment of much of the modern charismatic movement today, where there is no orderliness in the worship service. They speak or pray in tongues randomly at the same time with no one paying attention to one another. Many claim that tongues are uncontrollable. They are so caught up in the Spirit that they can’t control themselves. However, this is a clear violation of Paul’s command that **“each”** should speak **“in turn.”** Paul would not have made this restriction if speaking in tongues could not be controlled.

(3) One must interpret (v. 27)

Even when only two or three spoke in tongues, and even when they did so orderly, each in his turn, then there was a further restriction. The tongue must be interpreted, and evidently by only “one” interpreter, whether that one person be the speaker or someone else. John MacArthur notes, “The interpreters in Corinth were as self-serving as those who spoke in tongues, and each tried to outdo each other” [*1 Corinthians*, 386]. Hence, Paul emphasizes “one” interpreter. If more than one tried to interpret, whether simultaneously or otherwise, it would cause delay and confusion.

(4) If there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God (v. 28)

In the absence of such order and interpretation, Paul says, “**he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.**” Again we see that there is an emphasis on control. Some hyper-spiritual uncontrollable frenzy in exercising spiritual gifts has no place in Paul’s orderly worship. Those who spoke in tongues could control their utterances. If there was no interpreter, then they were to remain silent. To speak without interpretation would not edify the body. This echoes Paul’s thoughts from 14:2 and 14:9 that we looked at last week. This is about as simple as it gets for Paul. No interpreter, no speaking out loud. If a person still felt compelled to speak, then he was to do so privately with God. He was not to disrupt the entire worship service with an uninterpreted and unintelligible tongue.

2. The issue of prophecy (vv. 29-33a)

Paul deals next with the issue of prophecy, which he introduced as being superior to tongues in the opening verses of this chapter. However, just as with tongues, prophecy could disrupt the order in worship if not exercised properly. So, to help guard against an overcorrection on the part of the Corinthians, Paul gives four similar restrictions to that of tongues concerning prophecy in corporate worship.

(1) Let two or three prophets speak

As was the case with tongues, Paul permits two, at the most three, prophets to speak. These New Testament prophets served two functions. First, they still received new revelation directly from God to share with the church. This was prior to the completion of the writings of our canon of Scripture when this function of prophecy ceased. Second, they reiterated what the apostles taught, the foundation that was being laid. This is similar to what preachers and teachers do today in proclaiming the foundation of truth that has been laid by the apostles. For the sake of order, no more than three prophets were to prophesy in a service.

(2) Let the others pass judgment

Further, others were to judge the prophecy. This judgment is more than a simply sanctified opinion. Some versions have “weigh what is said.” This was vitally important given the nature of revealed truth. Those that would pass judgment would check for truth, accuracy and consistency. Some questions to evaluate the criteria might be as follows: Does it glorify God? Does it build up the church? Is it spoken in love? Does the speaker submit to judgment by others? Is the speaker in control of himself? Does the speaker go on too long? Is the speaker demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit in his life? And, for the church today, is it in accord with Scripture? [David Prior, *1 Corinthians*, 251]. These are all questions of discernment to weigh

when one speaks in public worship. “**Others**” seems to indicate that all who were spiritual were to be involved in these judgments. Some argue that “**others**” refers to those with the spiritual gift of discernment. However, this seems to limit the intellectual and doctrinal emphasis that Paul is setting forth in desiring these at Corinth to pursue prophecy over tongues. Therefore, the view that all believers were to weigh what was spoken seems best.

(3) If a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent.

If someone received a revelation while another was speaking, then the first speaker was to stop. Again we see Paul’s stress on order and, more importantly, control. There were those at Corinth that thought prophecy, particularly immediate revelation, was something that came upon the prophet suddenly and was uncontrollable. Anticipating their argument, Paul here commands control. The speaker was to “**keep silent.**”

This too flies in the face of what we see in many Pentecostal settings today where a number of “prophets” receive a fresh word from God simultaneously. I wonder if their revelations ever contradict one another? And we know that these new revelations often contradict God’s final revelation.

(4) Prophecy one by one (v. 31)

In time, all the prophets would have their turn. If the Corinthians would adhere to this orderliness, then “**all may learn and all may be exhorted.**” This was the crux of Paul’s argument from the very beginning, that all would be edified when one exercised their spiritual gifts in a proper and orderly manner. Further, Paul wrote, “**the spirit of prophets are subject to prophets**” (v. 32). In other words, within limits prophets could control how and when they prophesied.

Paul reinforces this idea of control in v. 33a, “**God is not a God of confusion but of peace.**” When the Spirit of God is truly in control of one’s spiritual gifts, there is peace, not chaos and confusion; there is understanding, not ignorance.

3. The issue of submission (vv. 33b-35)

I follow D.A. Carson and others line of reasoning that the phrase “**as in all the churches of the saints**” belongs as an introduction to v. 34 rather than a conclusion on the matter of prophecy and God’s orderliness. Of course God would be the same in all the churches. He never changes. To connect v. 33b with what precedes seems trite and meaningless. It seems therefore to serve as an introduction to one of the most disputed passages in Scripture. Feminists and liberal theologians turn to this passage to show their belief that Paul was a male chauvinist or hyper-patriarchal. Strict authoritarians turn here to prove that a woman is never to speak in church. These are both views that go beyond what is admittedly a difficult text.

The difficulty in this text lies in the fact that in 11:2-16 Paul indicated that it was proper for a woman to pray and prophecy in worship, albeit with the restriction of God’s established order of man and woman. In this text Paul says three times that a woman is to remain silent. This, for some, is a contradiction. Some try to overcome this tension by saying that these verses were added later and not the writing of Paul. However, this is without warrant. Others say that in chapter 11 Paul is dealing with women in the privacy of the home and in these verses he is dealing with public worship. There are numerous reasons that the context will not allow for this interpretation (see D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 122-124).

There are many other interpretations that try to resolve the tension between these two texts, but it seems best to read this passage as Paul returning to the issue of wives honoring their husbands in public worship. Wives must be sure to behave in ways that honor God's established authority in their husbands. This is one way that wives are to edify the church as they worship. As one writer contends,

The order for silence, therefore, is closely associated with the requirement to test prophecy. In effect, Paul told wives not to question their husband's prophecies in the public meeting. Instead, if they wanted to inquire, they were to ask their husbands at home. Paul's reason for this was the same as in 11:6: it is **disgraceful** for a wife to behave otherwise. Just as covering their heads in worship brought honor to their husbands in the Corinthian church, so it was important for wives not to embarrass their husbands by challenging their prophecies in public. [Richard Pratt, *1 Corinthians*, 516]

This seems to be the proper interpretation here. Evidently, there were women who were disrupting the orderly flow of worship by questioning either their husbands prophecies or the prophecies of other men in public worship. Paul says this is improper. The woman should wait and discuss the matter with her husband in private.

II. Obedience to God's Word (14:36-40)

Having dealt with their belief that the more unorganized a service was the better by emphasizing order and control in worship, Paul turns to another of their unfounded beliefs that unorganized worship was a supreme expression of spirituality.

1. Foundation for right worship (vv. 36-37)

The Corinthians used the wrong criteria to measure their spirituality. The only objective standard we have to measure our spiritual worship is the word of God. Paul strikes right to the heart of the issue by asking, **"Was it from you that the word of God first went forth?"** The Corinthians were acting as if they were the authorities when it came to Scripture, as if they were the one's whom God had given apostolic revelation. In doing so, they became the wise one's, often not recognizing Paul's authority. Paul's question here carries great force, much like God's questioning of Job in Job 38:

Job 38:1-4 – Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, ² "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? ³ "Now gird up your loins like a man, and I will ask you, and you instruct Me! ⁴ "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell *Me*, if you have understanding."

Further, Paul asks, **"Or has it come to you only?"** I don't know if you have noticed to this point in 1 Corinthians, but Paul addresses things that he does not have to address in other churches. They were acting as if somehow God had given them a different word than he had given to all the other churches. So Paul exhorts them, **"If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment."** Recognize the authority of God's Word – and to obey it. Our obedience shows our belief. Conversely, when we freely disobey God's commands, we demonstrate unbelief.

We too need to be reminded of this. There are times where we need to stop and examine our hearts and motives in light of God's Word, especially when it comes to worship.

Regulative principle of worship

2. Warning for disobedience (v. 38)

Paul then gives a stark warning for not abiding by the authority of Scripture. **“But if anyone does not recognize *this*, he is not recognized.”** This is Paul’s severest warning in the entire letter. The warning is the consequence of knowing God’s command and ignoring it. D. A. Carson notes, “The Corinthians may pursue their own self-interested definitions of what is spiritual, and run the risk of being ignored *by God*; or they may recognize afresh that their confession of Jesus as Lord is not only the significant criterion of the Spirit’s presence (12:1-3) but something that can be tested by enthusiastic obedience to that of the Lord’s, mediated through the apostle” [*Showing the Spirit*, 134].

The Corinthians evidently thought that they alone were right. They had somehow cornered the market on understanding God’s Word. But they were severely mistaken. God had given them both His Word and the apostle of His Word and they should have submitted to both. Instead, they became an authority unto themselves. In so doing, they proved that they were not spiritual at all.

The warning is clear for us today. We live in a society that frowns upon any structure of authority. This is a result of pride and self-interest. “Submission” is not a popular word in our culture because we want to be our own boss. We must be careful that we do not neglect or fail to recognize those authorities that God has placed in our lives. His Word, spiritual leaders in the church, the congregation, husbands, and parents are authorities to be obeyed in the church. Obviously, they are to be submitted to only as they adhere to the first authority, God’s Word.

3. Conclusion on conduct in worship (vv. 39-40)

Paul’s point is clear. The truly spiritual person is the one who hears God’s Word and obeys it. It is not that spiritual gifts are not important. Paul again exhorts them, **“Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues” (v. 39).** But these things should not eclipse orderliness in worship and obedience to His Word. **“But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner” (v. 40).**

Conclusion

(1) Are you using your spiritual gifts in a way that honor and glorifies the Lord, not self, for the building up of His church?

(2) Do you willingly and joyfully submit to the authority of God’s Word and to those in authority over you?

(3) Remember that God is a God of order. He is the author of all goodness, beauty, and truth. Satan is the author of confusion. He looks for every opportunity to cause chaos by devaluing goodness, defacing beauty, and subverting truth. And, as the Corinthians proved, he often needs to go no further than our own self-centered hearts. Are you truly serving God as He desires?