

THE NECESSITY OF ORDER IN OUR WORSHIP

SERIES: SPIRITUAL REALITIES IN THE CHURCH

By Doug Goins

First Corinthians 14 was written as an apostolic corrective to a congregation worshipping together selfishly. We saw in our study of verses 1-25 ([Discovery Paper 4533](#)) that the church in Corinth struggled with unity and common purpose when they gathered together for services of worship and praise. Paul told them to grow up. There was immaturity at work among them. There was an inability to agree on consistent priorities in their public worship services. The central theme in Paul's counsel was the priority of spiritual edification in worship, of clear communication through the prophetic proclamation of truth. Paul said that if there was going to be speaking in tongues, it had to be interpreted. The apostle was convinced that a commitment to edification in worship would result in public meetings that were meaningful to believers and also understandable to those who were not yet Christians.

So if the central theme of verses 1-25 was edification, then the focus of verses 26-40 is the necessity of order in worship. That word "order" appears twice in verses 26-40. In verse 33 Paul says, "God is not a God of confusion [disorder] but of peace...." In verse 40 he says, "But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner." Now we know from earlier studies in this letter that the church was having special problems with disorder in their community worship. Back in 11:17-18, when Paul was writing to them about disorder that he had been informed of in their love feasts and their celebration of the Lord's Supper, he said: "But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it."

The section that flows out of that, 11:19-14:40, tells us that these believers were using their spiritual gifts to please themselves, not to help their brothers and sisters. So the key word in Corinth was not "edification" but "exhibition." They were showing off in worship. Someone who is convinced that their own sensitivities and desires in worship are more legitimate than their brother's will be unaccepting of him, perhaps even condescending toward him. Someone who believes that their own contribution to the worship service is more important than their sister's will be impatient until she finishes, or tempted to disdain her participation completely. The disorderliness in Corinth resulted from a high degree of individualized worship expectations in their services. The result, Paul says, is carnal confusion, not edifying order.

Paul's response is to offer some guidelines for orderly regulation of worship based on self-control. He assumes that the Holy Spirit is resident in these people, and one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. He also assumes that *agape*, the supernatural love of God, will be at work, that they'll be concerned with other people's needs ahead of their own needs.

PARTICIPATING IN WORSHIP

Let's read the opening exhortation in verse 26. This is a picture of worship in the early church, and it speaks of this issue of order.

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

Listen to the paraphrase of that verse from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the New Testament, *The Message*:

"So here's what I want you to do. When you gather together for worship, each one of you be prepared with something that will be useful for all: Sing a hymn, teach a lesson, tell a story, lead a prayer, provide an insight." (1)

That makes it clearer that this listing is not to be seen as an exhaustive order of service or some sort of liturgical formula that we should build on. Paul doesn't list prophecy, which he mentions later on in the chapter. This verse gives us sample contributions that might be offered in a given service. Other elements of early Christian worship are listed in a number of places. One is at the end of Acts 2, right after the birth of the church at Pentecost, where the early life of the church in Jerusalem is described. Among the things they did when they got together were sitting under apostolic instruction, enjoying fellowship, observing the Lord's Supper, praying, sharing finances, having love feasts, holding worship services, and doing evangelism.

What Paul is emphasizing here in verse 26 is that the Corinthians come to worship prepared, anticipating, ready to participate spontaneously and informally. We saw this in verse 16, where Paul expected some hearty "Amen!"s to explode out of the congregation, acknowledging agreement, participating in what was being said or offered in the service.

Let's look more closely at the list in verse 26. It says that they were called to participate by singing a psalm. In Ephesians 5 Paul also mentions singing of hymns (*humnos*) and spiritual songs. In our worship in this church, we sing some texts that are based on the Psalms, the Old-Testament hymnbook of the Jewish people. We sing newly composed hymns of praise, worship, and adoration of the Lord. And we sing spiritual songs that speak of experience, feeling, the subjective side of our relationship with the Lord.

Paul goes on to mention a teaching, perhaps a doctrinal instruction that would be shared in the service.

He mentions a revelation. A revelation is truth communicated directly from God. God communicated in that way with the Biblical writers, and before the New-Testament canon of Scripture was completed, God spoke words of revelation to individuals in the early church. Paul mentions personal revelations several different times in his writings. But now God has completed the revelation, and we have it in our Bible. He reveals himself to us through the enscripturated word. Thinking back through the years, in our services of worship, body life, or other fellowship gatherings, men and women have stood with their Bibles to share an insight that the Lord gave them, something he had recently taught them. It may clarify things doctrinally, or offer real personal application for our lives from the life of that individual.

The last thing Paul mentions is tongues and interpretation of tongues. We talked about that at length in the last message. But because of abuse in the church in Corinth, these gifts will call for regulation, which is going to follow.

Now Paul makes the point in the last statement in verse 26 that all of this exciting participation has to be purposeful. "Let all things be done for edification." Everything ought to be offered with the concern that people be built up spiritually, not to show off or benefit the person who is offering the expression of worship.

It struck me that we keep coming to church here on Sunday morning because we expect that there will be spiritual impact in our lives. We will be challenged, encouraged, strengthened, and reminded of things that we need to hear as we face into the week ahead. And for those of us who participate in leading and planning the worship service, it ought to be our desire that everything we do benefit the hearers—uplift spirits, encourage hearts, give minds understanding. Our corporate worship ought to grow out of an attitude of expectancy that God is going to meet us here, that he is going to reveal himself to us, and that he is going to be at work in us preparing us for the week ahead. We talked in the last message about the beautiful effect of edification: It stabilizes us; it either provides foundations underneath us or shores up shaky walls in our lives. Edification is at the heart of worship.

Eugene Peterson, in his book *Reversed Thunder*, talks about what happens to us if worship is not at the center of our life:

"Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are in turn alarmed by specters and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose." (2)

THREE LIMITS ON THE GIFT OF TONGUES

Now Paul warns us in verses 27-35 of three potential areas of disorder in our public worship. He is going to temper the spontaneity he has just described in verse 26. He is going to regulate the expression of tongues, the gift of prophesying, and the participation of women in public worship. And because tongues seemed to be the most problematic, he begins there. Look at verses 27-28:

If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.

Now we saw in the last message as we went through the first section of chapter 14 that the spiritual gift of tongues is the ability to speak in an unlearned foreign language. It would be understood by those who knew the language, but not by the person who was speaking it. Tongues is an expression of praise and worship expressed to God, not to men. But it's a gift to be expressed publicly, and the announced Biblical purpose of tongues is to be a sign to unbelievers, a pre-evangelistic tool to arrest attention. When it's used this way, it does edify the one who speaks, but that can't be the end purpose of the expression of the gift. And it wasn't intended to edify the church, Paul said, but it can edify the church if it's interpreted and if it's expressed in the presence of a nonbeliever who speaks the language.

There are only three simple limits that Paul puts on the expression of this gift in verses 27-28. Only two or three people may speak in tongues in any given service. They may speak only one at a time. And there must be an interpretation; if not, they shouldn't speak. Remember, we saw the problem in verse 23 that if many people are talking in tongues and a nonbeliever comes into the service, he or she will think they're mad. Paul says they don't want to confuse the nonbeliever. They want to make it easier for the person to understand the message of the gospel.

It's also clear in these two verses that tongues is not the result of an irresistible impulse of the Holy Spirit. Anybody with the gift of tongues can choose not to exercise the gift if the circumstances require it.

After I preached the last message, many people asked me what the place of the gift of tongues is in the church today. Our sovereign Lord is absolutely free to do whatever he wants in using this gift for the purposes defined in his word. I had never seen or heard of this Biblical use of the gift of tongues until just a couple of years ago. Mark Verber told us a story in a men's study about a church that he was familiar with. It wasn't a charismatic or Pentecostal church, but there was a lot of spontaneity and freedom in the worship. At one point somebody stood and spoke in a language that nobody there understood whatsoever. Someone stood to interpret the message of worship and praise that had been given, but there was really no response at that time in the service. But after the service, a visitor who was a non-Christian African national made a beeline for the person who had spoken in the tongue and said, "You were speaking my language!" He understood the message that was given. I don't know if he became a Christian or not, but to me that would clearly be the Biblical use of the gift of tongues in a public setting.

THREE LIMITS ON THE GIFT OF PROPHECY

Next Paul speaks of the ordering of prophecy in worship in verses 29-33:

And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

Now again, by way of review, we saw last week that if we understand the spiritual gift of prophesying in the broadest sense, it is very close to what we would call teaching or preaching today. That's a good definition of the word as it's used in different settings in the New Testament. Remember, Paul's concern in this chapter is that God be able to speak to his people through the ministry of the word in public worship.

The Old-Testament prophets spoke the word of God by direct revelation to his people. Their primary ministry was forth-telling, not foretelling. There were elements of prediction, but the bulk of the writing the prophets did was telling forth the message that God wanted the nation Israel to hear. And each generation of prophetic spokesmen built on the prior written message. Often, they quoted the writings of earlier prophets in their own writing, building Scripture on Scripture.

Now, prophetic ministry in the early church in the first century was built on three things. First, it was built on the Old Testament. That was their Bible, and prophecy had to come from that or line up with that. Second, it was built on the teaching of the apostles, in their letters that were being circulated, and in person as they traveled around from church to church. And third, it was based on direct revelation from God, as I said earlier, until the New-Testament revelation was complete.

Ephesians 4:11 tells us that God has given prophets to his church. My conviction is that this ministry today belongs to those who stand before the word of God and cause it to shine. There ought to be a transparency in prophetic ministry, so that those to whom it ministers see through the prophet to the message of the word.

But Paul has to place limits on the expression of this good gift as well, because of the presence of self-absorbed, ego-driven prophets in that church. Again, there are just three simple constraints. First, there are to be no more than two or three prophetic messages in any given meeting, and obviously they must be offered one after the other, not all at the same time. Second, each message has to be evaluated, because preaching needs examination. Third, prophets have to be submissive to one another out of reverence for the Lord himself. Self-control can be exercised as with the gift of tongues. Nobody needs to dominate a worship service.

This apostolic counsel is very close to Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonian church. First Thessalonians 5:16-22 is wrapped around the prophetic ministry. (When you hear these pithy commands, think about how you come to worship. Is this what carries you through the service?) "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophetic utterances. But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil."

In both 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul says they are to evaluate or examine prophetic messages. The reason for that is to determine whether the speaker really is speaking the word of God, whether he or she is empowered by the Spirit of God. A good question out of verse 29 in our passage is who the "others" are: "...Let the others pass judgment." Are they fellow prophets who have the responsibility to evaluate the prophetic word, or is it others in the body? In 1 Thessalonians 5 it's everybody; all of us are to examine closely what we're told from the platform.

Wayne Grudem teaches New Testament at Trinity Seminary, and he has written a book on prophesying. He comments on this passage in 1 Corinthians 14. He believes that everybody in the church is supposed to evaluate the ministry of prophecy.

"Certainly when prophecy is taken to include Spirit-filled preaching, it seems clear that the ordinary lay

person is often in a better position to determine how well or accurately the preacher has communicated than are fellow preachers, who are absorbed in the fine points of theology or technique of the message." (3)

I got a chuckle out of this because I think it is so true. We elders and pastors do that to one another too often. Last week two good brothers in the body at PBC e-mailed me about my last message on tongues and prophecy, and they asked good, thoughtful questions about how I got to certain points regarding interpretation. It was a stimulating dialogue. I had think through how I did get there, and it even had great effect in terms of preparing to preach this message. So I am grateful for that helpful interaction and evaluation.

Verses 30-33 are a summary of how prophets are to relate to one another. They don't have to give their message; they can defer to one another. If the Holy Spirit is really in charge of the worship services, there will be no competition or contradiction between the messages. The speakers will have self-control as a fruit of the Spirit.

I was blessed last week in our Sunday morning service by the mutual submission that Mike Benkert, Brian Wo, Kirk Bunnell, and I enjoyed in our leadership of the services here. The four of us were at peace with the Lord and at peace with one another. We had a great time of prayer together before worship last Sunday morning. I've had the same sense this morning as well. A variety of people have given leadership in drama, music, Scripture-reading, hosting, giving testimony, and preaching. There has been a wonderful sense of being a team, cooperating, and submitting to one another for the good of the whole.

I saw this principle violated in Pakistan last year at a pastors' conference I was part of. Craig Duncan was part of the team from PBC, and he taught a session each day on the centrality of prayer in the pastor's life. After one of the sessions the leader of the meeting invited the pastors to respond to Craig's message in spontaneous prayer. We had a twenty-minute prayer time. At one point a lady started praying with great fervor and volume, and, as it turned out, without any terminal facility whatsoever. She prayed on and on. I was sitting on the platform, and I watched people start to squirm and get uncomfortable. Finally the leader of the meeting got up and came to the microphone, and with great sensitivity, gently said, "While our sister finishes her prayer, let's sing a closing hymn together." And we sort of sang over this very insensitive woman who was doing her thing with the Lord but didn't really care about the good of the whole.

WOMEN FORBIDDEN TO SPEAK OUT OF TURN

The next two verses can seem a bit intrusive, because they talk about the ordering of women in worship. Look at verses 34-35:

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

Now, why does Paul seem to interrupt his discussion of these two spiritual gifts to silence women? To begin with, we must interpret these two verses in the context of 11:2-16, where he already addressed women's praying and prophesying in the church. Let's read 11:5-6: "But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head." As we saw when we studied that passage ([Discovery Paper 4528](#)), Paul expected women to have vocal participation in the services by praying and prophesying. But he insisted that they recognize God's moral order of leadership in the home and the church, and to demonstrate their submission to the headship of their husbands and of elders in the church by covering their heads in worship.

The problem in both chapter 11 and chapter 14 is with married women who had experienced incredible freedom in Christ but were taking their freedom too far. Not wearing a veil in public was as culturally

outrageous as wearing short hair like a prostitute. At the end of the section in chapter 11, the issue was argumentativeness or contentiousness. The women were saying, "Don't we have the freedom in Christ to defend our position?" The problem in chapter 11 and here in chapter 14 was that their husbands were being shamed because they were exercising their freedom in a selfish manner.

But if women were free to express themselves in worship, why does Paul tell them twice that they aren't to speak (verses 34, 35)? The answer lies in the vocabulary that Paul has chosen. The Greek word for "talk" speaks of the most normal kind of conversation, even inconsequential talk.

Literally it can be interpreted "chatter." Paul is saying that the women should not chatter during the worship services. Some of the wives (not all of them) were interrupting the worship with inappropriate talkativeness, perhaps asking questions or talking with other people sitting around them. What Paul suggests in verse 35 is that they might have been discussing things in church that were more appropriately discussed with their husbands at home. Perhaps some of the Corinthian wives needed to learn that lengthy discussion or theological debate did not belong in the worship service. An unwillingness to do what was right in this would shame their husbands as much as an uncovered head.

I tried to think of an example of that in my experience here at PBC. The closest I could come was an incident that took place a few years ago when I was teaching on marriage in the Couples' Class. It was quite an interactive and discussion-oriented class. But at one point a lady stood up, with her husband sitting there, and basically complained about his leadership. I don't remember what the issue was, but I remember how embarrassing it was for that poor man to hear his wife publicly criticize him as a spiritual leader in their relationship. Her complaint was a legitimate issue that needed to be dealt with, but not in that public setting.

SUBMISSION TO GOD BRINGS ORDER

Now, what is going to bring order out of disorder in our worship services? In verses 36-38 Paul says simply to be submissive to Jesus and to the word of God, and that will bring order.

Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?

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. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

There are three simple spiritual principles here. First, no one church can claim special revelation or privilege. There was a tendency among some in Corinth to think that they had unique revelation and special gifts that nobody else had. Paul's tone is quite sarcastic. It echoes Job's sarcasm when he was responding to his counselors who were trying to give him theological reasons for his suffering. Job 12:1:

**"Truly then you are the people,
And with you wisdom will die."**

The reality in Corinth was that worship was out of control. Spontaneity had turned into chaos and self-indulgence. It was not in line with apostolic tradition or teaching. Their own institutional arrogance had blinded them to their selfishness and lovelessness. Their worship services were driven by personal pride, not humility before the Lord. The word of God was not controlling their understanding of worship.

That can happen to our church. We can become institutionally arrogant about how and why we do things in worship. We've spent the summer as a pastoral staff taking a break from our staff Bible study and working through Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* (4) on the nature of community in the church. Bonhoeffer has a lot to say about corporate worship. We spent an hour and a half on Tuesday talking about singing and music in corporate worship. We've been challenged in our traditions by this thoughtful Lutheran pastor writing in 1935. Looking at church from a confessional perspective (members must

confess the denominational creed), which is very different from ours historically, he has forced us to examine our own biases, challenging whatever uniqueness we feel that we have as a church.

That brings us to the second principle: No spiritual gift or insight is above apostolic authority. The point Paul is making is that if we are spiritually mature, then we will submit ourselves to the command of the Lord as it relates to our corporate worship life. Truly spiritual people always recognize the ultimate authority of Scripture. They don't try to universalize their own experience. The Holy Spirit of God will never operate contrary to the written word of God.

Ray Stedman wrote an article entitled *True Worship* in which he talks about the dangers of ignoring these two principles in examining worship life:

"Corporate worship, like individual worship, can easily drift into external expressions without heartfelt participation. The motive for worship may subtly shift from the praise of God to gaining the attention or approval of others. Hymns may be mouthed with no comprehension of what is being sung. Rituals may be observed mechanically, or Biblical phrases chanted in a formal or routine manner. Frigid formalism requiring bodily stillness and solemn, expressionless faces, harshness and authoritarianism from leaders, guilt-appeal-centered offerings, showmanship, attempts to program the Holy Spirit, use of exalted titles, claiming of special access to God—all these vitiate worship and reveal it as fleshly and unspiritual.

Many passages of Scripture describe God's revulsion at that type of hypocrisy. He is not honored but rather insulted by such phoniness. Such worship becomes a pathetic charade in which people often try to get God to pay attention to them or to do something for them. It's destructive and deadening and will soon result in a terrible drain of spiritual vitality from an individual or a congregation.

But authentic worship breaks down personal antagonisms, eliminates selfish ambition, produces genuine humility and thankfulness, and links heart to heart, building the church up in love." (5)

That's the result of submission to Jesus Christ as the Lord of worship and submission to his word as defining worship for us.

The third principle is, simply put, to ignore the person who ignores the first two principles. Don't pay attention to anybody who wants to introduce non-Biblical innovation into the worship life of the church.

ORDER REFLECTS GOD'S CHARACTER

Paul closes this section in verses 39-40 with a summary exhortation to order in our public worship. He calls the Corinthians "brethren," or brothers and sisters, for the fourth time in this chapter. This is a word of correction, but he's part of them and in this with them.

Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner.

This is the consistent message throughout the entire chapter: Make prophesying, the ministry of the word, the priority. Proclamation ought to be the most important ministry in our worship. It will build people up, comfort them, strengthen them.

But he adds, "Don't discourage the true Biblical gift of tongues." Who knows when a nonbeliever might show up who would be receptive to such a miraculous, arresting sign of God's presence? God is sovereign over his gifts. He has the right to give and exercise any of the gifts as he wills. So what right do we have to forbid him to express himself through that Biblical gift of tongues?

Finally, everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way, because God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace. Order in worship reflects the character of God. It speaks of structure and of limiting freedom. I tend to resist rules and regulations. But this chapter makes clear that it is neither unscriptural nor ungodly to be limited. Rather, God-defined order and discipline bring greater freedom. As we grow in our

corporate worship of this God of peace, there is an overflow into all of life. Meaningful worship is life-changing.

Here is the conclusion of Ray Stedman's article *True Worship*:

"The sign that true worship is being achieved is a maturing congregation. Personal witness is widespread. Loving service to those who hurt should be increasing. Friction among members should be decreasing. Appreciation for benefits and public thanksgiving should be often manifest. Moral standards are held in high regard, but deviations are not coldly treated, and the steps of discipline given in Matthew 18 are lovingly followed. The exposition of the word of God lies at the heart of every ministry, and the exercise of spiritual gifts is continually encouraged. When these things are happening, a congregation has clearly become the household of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth, a people belonging to God. And remember that the Father is seeking such to worship him. In true worship, something happens to the worshipers. Minds are cleared, perceptions come into focus, spirits are renewed, truth breaks out in new clarity. That's what sends us out to tell the good news to those who long for hope or peace or freedom from guilt." (6)

Notes:

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, © 1993, 1994 by Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 362.
2. Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, © 1988, Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA. P. 59.
3. Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in I Corinthians*, University Press of America, Washington, D. C., 1982. P. 58.
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein, © 1954, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York and Evanston.
5. Ray C. Stedman, *True Worship*, © 1992.
6. Ibid.

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