

“Decently and In Order”

The Twenty-Seventh in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians: 14:20-40; Isaiah 28:1-13

It has been said that the true creed of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches is Paul’s assertion in 1 Corinthians 14:40 to “do everything in good order.” While we often joke about the Reformed obsession with rules and proper procedure, we must not overlook the fact that this statement is Paul’s concluding point in his lengthy response to the Corinthian’s question to him about the role and proper exercise of the gift of tongues. Sadly, division and confusion reigned in the Corinthian church, and Paul is writing to correct a number of problems in the church, problems which led unbelievers to think the Corinthian Christians were crazy.

We now wrap up our study of chapters 12-14. Paul is answering a question put to him by the Corinthians about the role and practice of the gift of tongues. Apparently, the way in which the Corinthians were exercising this gift was causing division in the church, as well as creating much chaos during the Lord’s day worship service. Paul has emphasized the need for Christians to earnestly desire the gifts of the Spirit because these gifts are for the common good, they strengthen the churches, and they enable us to love one another (the more excellent way). Now, he gives explicit instructions as to how the Corinthians are to use this gift, as well as the gift of prophesy.

Throughout this chapter, Paul makes the point that while the tongue-speaking is indeed a true gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of tongues is inferior to the gift of prophecy. The reason for this is that those who speak in a tongue (whether that tongue is known or unknown to the speaker) cannot be understood by the assembled church unless the tongue is interpreted, while those who prophesy (which is Spirit-enabled speech, likely from the text of the Old Testament) speak in such a way that the congregation understands what is said. Therefore, the congregation is said to be edified by some word or revelation from God.

Last time, we covered the first nineteen verses of this chapter, so we will now take up the balance of the chapter, verses 20-40. In the last half of the chapter, Paul addresses the effects of uninterpreted tongue-speaking upon unbelievers who may happen to visit the Corinthian congregation during worship. Not only do believers remain unedified (because they cannot understand what is being said), but non-believers will be completely put off by the confusion and chaos created by uninterpreted tongues and by everyone speaking at once. Seeing the confusion and disorder in the service, visitors will think Christians are crazy! Or, even worse, visitors will think that Christians behave no differently than pagans. This explains why Paul exhorts the Corinthians in verse 20, “*brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.*” Paul softens the stern rebuke a bit by affectionately referring to the Corinthians as “brothers.” But the force of the imperative (command) must not be missed—“stop thinking like children.” The Greek text literally reads, “stop being children in mind.”¹ To paraphrase Paul: “grow up! Quit acting like children.”

While the Corinthians should remain naive (childlike) in regard to evil, Paul exhorts them to grow up (become mature) in an intellectual sense, so as to realize and correct their current behavior, which was utterly disruptive within the church as well as an obstacle to unbelievers coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 192.

In verse 21, Paul now turns to an Old Testament text to illustrate his point, citing from Isaiah 28:11, part of our Old Testament lesson: *“In the Law it is written, ‘By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.’”*

When Paul uses the term “Law” (*nomos*) here, he is using it in the broadest possible sense as a title, i.e., “the Old Testament” (not just the Pentateuch or the Ten Commandments). Paul makes a free citation from Isaiah 28:11—his words do not correspond either with the Hebrew text, nor to the LXX, so Paul is probably citing this passage loosely from memory.² Because Israel did not listen to God’s messenger (Isaiah), the nation came under judgment in the form of men of strange speech—i.e., Assyrian invaders from the north who spoke a language which the Israelites did not understand.

Because the prophets of Israel prophesied in Hebrew, Isaiah’s prophecy was intelligible. But when God’s judgment came in the form of hostile invaders who spoke different languages, the Israelites could not understand what was said. Because the Israelites did not listen to God, they were oppressed by people of strange tongues (with unintelligible speech). The application to be drawn from this is if the Corinthians continue to speak in uninterpreted tongues—even though the tongue-speaker will declare the wonders of God—people in the congregation will not be able to understand the words from God, even as the Israelites could not understand the Assyrians. Not being able to understand what is said is ultimately a form of judgment brought about by the people’s failure to do things properly.

This is the basis for Paul’s comment in verse 22: *“thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.”* On the face of it, this verse seems contradictory. But given what was said in verse 21, true prophecy was intelligible and was therefore of great benefit to those who believed that the prophet was from God. On the other hand, the unintelligible language of Israel’s conquerors was the result of the fact that the people of Israel did not believe God’s promises and thus came under God’s judgment in the form of unintelligible speech.

Like the Israelites, when the Corinthians prophesied (or spoke in a tongue which was subsequently translated) so as to be edifying to the church as a whole, this was of great benefit for those who believe the gospel. But when a tongue is not translated and no one can understand it, the confusion which results becomes a sign of God’s judgment.³ No one can listen to God, because no one can understand what is being said. Because of their current practice, the Corinthian church risks becoming like Israel—held captive to a people who cannot be understood.

This helps to explain the following point in verse 23. *“If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?”* If the church assembles for worship and people are speaking in tongues without interpretation (a sign of judgment connected to unbelief), and people are present who do not understand what is being spoken, and witness the confusion, they will react accordingly. “You people are crazy!” It is very likely that they will come to the conclusion that this assembly is no different from the Greco-Roman mystery religions found throughout Corinth, whose religious assemblies were characterized by wild behavior

² Hays points out that Paul also cites from this section of Isaiah in Romans 9:33. Unfortunately, he calls Paul’s argument “garbled.” See, Hays, First Corinthians, 240.

³ Robert Zerhusen, “The Problem of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14” also published in Biblical Theology Journal (1997) Vol. 27, (page number not indicated). Cf. Hays, First Corinthians, 240.

and ecstatic utterances, much of it unintelligible.⁴

But prophecy (or an interpreted tongue) has a markedly different effect, now described in verses 24-25. “*But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.*” The superiority of prophecy (preaching) is virtually self-evident in the effect that it has upon unbelievers. Although pagan religions emphasize religious experience and bizarre behavior, such should not be the characteristic of the church.

If the Corinthians focus upon prophecy, then the law and the gospel will be clearly proclaimed, so that when an unbeliever comes in, they will become aware of their sins, be aware that they are under God’s judgment and that they cannot keep their sins hidden from God. And what will the sinner’s response be? Instead of seeing the confusion of untranslated tongues as a sign of God’s judgment upon the church and think the people to be crazy, they will hear the law and gospel in an intelligible way. They will know that they are sinners in need of a savior. They will then say “God is really among you” (unlike the pagan religions). This is why prophesying and interpreted tongues are superior to an uninterpreted (untranslated) tongue, which is a sign of God’s judgment.

What follows is a rather interesting section of this letter because Paul gives us a brief glimpse of the way in which the Corinthians conducted worship—this is the only place in the New Testament where we find such a description. While not describing the entire service, it does seem to indicate that the Corinthian worship services were far less-structured than that of services conducted today, and this seems to be part of the problem. The more orderly services with which we are familiar are the result of Paul’s remarks.

In verses 26-33, Paul discusses how tongue-speaking and prophecy should be conducted within the Corinthian church. In verse 26 Paul writes, “*What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.*” When Paul speaks of the Corinthian church “assembling for worship,” Paul indicates that everybody had something to contribute (although there is nothing to indicate that everybody participated with every gift in every worship service). Although Paul does not mention prophecy in this list—a matter of some surprise, since Paul has been speaking of the superiority of prophecy to tongues—“a revelation” may be the same thing (or similar) to prophecy.

A hymn (or song) refers to someone who sings (probably accompanied by instrumentation of some sort). There are a number of instances recorded in the New Testament of Christians singing during worship (see v. 15; Matthew 26:30; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). When Paul says everyone has a hymn, he is probably referring to someone who would sing a song which they themselves had composed, or else which was used by early Christians in worship.⁵

A word of instruction (*didache*) is some form of Christian teaching or instruction. A revelation is probably a reference to something similar to a prophecy—God revealing how Christ is revealed in an Old Testament text (or similar—remember there was no New Testament yet). An interpretation, of course, refers to an interpretation of a tongue. Paul lays out precise instructions for this in verses 27-28. “*If any*

⁴ Hays, First Corinthians, 238-239.

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 194.

“speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.”

It was the misuse of this gift which created so much controversy among the Corinthians, so Paul takes up this matter first. Many of these issues are simply matters of practicality. Paul limits the number of tongue-speakers to two or three only. What is key here is that tongue-speakers are to speak one at a time, not simultaneously, which is, apparently, what had been causing so much of the trouble (confusion). And when someone spoke in a tongue (unintelligible) it must be immediately interpreted so that everyone can understand what was being said. If there is no one there who can interpret the tongue, then the tongue-speaker is to keep silent and pray and praise God privately. These two verses, it seems to me, make perfect sense on the alternative view. Why would God give his people a supernatural utterance which they do not understand, yet withhold interpretation so that the person must remain silent?

In verse 29, Paul now turns his attention to the use of prophecy. *“Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.”* Seeking to keep things orderly, Paul likewise restricts the number of those prophets who can speak to two or three people, and that the members of the congregation should listen very carefully to what the prophets have to say. But if the Holy Spirit gives someone a particularly important revelation (the revelation of something previously hidden in God’s word), then, the situation described in v. 30 applies. *“If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.”* Paul’s point is not to stifle the Spirit, but to do all things in good order (see v. 33).

When the Spirit gives someone the revelation of a mystery regarding Jesus Christ, the speaker should allow the person who is sitting down (presumably listening—v. 29), to be given a turn to speak. The reason for this is spelled out in verse 31. *“For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged.”* Again, the purpose for such precise instruction is to end the mass confusion which was leading to disruption in the worship service, and to provide a scenario in which everyone present in the church might be instructed and encouraged—i.e. edified.

Just as tongue-speakers are to control their actions, so too are those with the gift of prophecy. This, it seems to me, is a huge problem for those who conduct worship services in which public outbursts are tolerated and encouraged. This not only disrupts the worship service, it creates the kind of situation in which non-Christians do not hear the law and the gospel. *“And the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.”* Those who have the gift of prophecy can control its use, and are to do so, for the reason spelled in the first half of verse 33. *“For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.”*

The Corinthians must not emulate the pagans and allow public assemblies (especially, Christian worship) to degenerate into a free for all, in which people indulge themselves in individualistic and inappropriate behavior. God desires peace, so that the members of the church be instructed, encouraged, strengthened, and edified. This is why the worship service is to be conducted along the lines suggested by Paul. Everything should be done in good order, as expressly stated in verse 40.

Paul has already addressed the question of the roles of women in the church (1 Corinthians 11:2) and Paul reiterates here what was said earlier. Christian women are to be modest and not reflect the pagan mores of Corinth. Christians must not adopt the pagan sexuality (androgynous, immoral and immodest), increasingly found throughout the Greco-Roman world. Christian worship is to be orderly and Christian women are to be modest.

In verses 33b-35, Paul lays down the same principle for the Corinthians that all the other churches

follow. *“As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.”* The standing principle of the churches to which the Corinthians must conform is that women are not to speak in the churches during worship.

In Greco-Roman culture, women did not speak or say anything in public (except to other women). To do so was to be considered rude, immodest and disrespectful of one’s husband (or father). It was the recent and on-going emancipation of women in Corinth which had created the situation which Paul is writing to correct. Women in Greek culture were becoming increasingly immodest and unwilling to follow accepted social norms, much of it stirred by pagan religious practices and spirituality. To avoid identification with this pagan trend, Paul has already exhorted women to avoid wearing their hair in such a way as to identify themselves in appearance with temple prostitutes or devotees of goddess worship. Paul exhorts Christian women not to speak in the church (presumably he is referring to prophecy or tongue-speaking), as a sign of submission to their husbands (or fathers), the essence of public modesty.

When Paul refers to the law, the question is “what part of the law?” Most commentators believe that this refers to the fact that the husband is to exercise headship over his wife (especially when it comes to theological/ecclesiastical matters) as stated in Genesis 3:16: *“To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.’”* This is why Paul exhorts women to ask their husbands questions at home, since to do so in public was considered a sign of disrespect. It may also have been the case that the early churches followed the practice of the synagogues, in which men and women sat on opposite sides of the room. If women were to try and talk with each other or with their husbands (across the room), it would have been very disruptive. That may have been part of the problem in Corinth.

It is important to remember that women of that era received no formal education—Jews still considered it a sin to teach a woman and Jews had a higher view of women than most.⁶ Women were treated poorly in the ancient world and it must be pointed out that Jesus saw no problem in instructing women (Luke 10:39-42), a practice which carried over into the early churches. Christianity did not oppress women.

A couple of points of application need to be addressed. For one thing, Paul is not addressing the question here of what women can and cannot do in the church. He is speaking to the subject of the importance of modesty and differentiating Christian worship from paganism in light of the particular problems in Corinth. Christians are to be modest and behave decently. The application of this command means women should be silent in worship (not disruptive) and submissive to their husbands. To do otherwise is to be immodest. Paul does not here say that woman cannot say anything in public (only that they should not speak in worship) and it was Calvin’s view (for example) that women can and should participate in other public activities for which Christians assemble—i.e. prayer and Bible study.⁷

Paul now brings the Corinthians his final words on the subject. Paul starts off in verse 36 by rebuking them for their pride. *“Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?”* Once again it is difficult to know whether the Corinthians actually thought this to be the case,

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 198.

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or whether Paul is being a bit sarcastic. Regardless, this demonstrates that the issue underlying most of the Corinthian's problems is pride. The word of God did not originate with them and they are not the only church. Furthermore, they must give due consideration to making sure their practices are the same as that of other Christian churches.

In verse 37, Paul reminds the Corinthians of his apostolic authority to issue binding edicts about how worship should be conducted. *"If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord."* Since Paul is writing with the full authority of his office, even those who claim to be prophets and "spiritual" are obligated to obey Paul's command. If the gifts of the Spirit are for the edification of church then these gifts must be used in the right way and in-line with the Apostle's instructions. According to verse 38, there will be serious consequences if Paul's advice is not followed. *"If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized."*

If people in the Corinthian church fail to heed these instructions, they will be ignored during worship. Those who truly possess the Holy Spirit and exercise the gifts of the Spirit will not behave in such a way as to cause disruption. Because they are concerned for the church and they love their brothers and sisters, they will gladly heed Paul's instructions. But should they fail to follow Paul's instructions, they demonstrate that they are not truly spiritual. As Paul states in verse 39, *"So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues."* Prophecy is superior, but tongues (when properly used and interpreted) should not be forbidden.

Paul concludes his answer to the Corinthian's question about speaking in tongues and order in worship with a very important comment in verse 40: *"But all things should be done decently and in order."* This is the key principle by which all public worship should be conducted. Content is important, but so is doing things in the proper way. Immodest, self-centered, and disruptive behavior has no place in Christian worship. According to Paul, everything should be done in a way which is fitting with God's purpose for public worship—namely that Christ's word be proclaimed, that the sacraments are administered properly, and so that everything which is done by God's people, serves the common good and brings him honor and glory. This is the ideal which the elders of the church are to pursue.

What should we take with us from this passage?

While we laugh about the Reformed and Presbyterian obsession with rules and procedures, it is an apostolic command to do things decently and in good order. This is so that nothing detracts from the proclamation of the gospel—that everyone hears and understands the preaching of Christ crucified for sinners—and so that Christian worship does not descend into chaos like that of paganism. In the Corinthian context, Paul will not allow the worship service to be dominated by particular individuals with gigantic egos and personal agendas. The only one who can dominate worship, is Jesus Christ, the Lord of his church!

Scripture clearly spells out several things which are to be done during Christian worship (i.e., the elements of worship). Take Acts 2:42 for example—the Apostles' teaching, the Lord's Supper, fellowship with the risen Christ and with each other, and the prayers. How we do these things on Sunday morning isn't specified, but it falls to the consistory (the ministers and elders) to make sure that everything that is done during worship exalts Christ, is intelligible to all, serves the common good, is done from the motive of love, and done "decently and in good order." This is so that everyone who visits us hears the gospel and doesn't leave thinking we are crazy!