

**“The God of Order”**  
**1 Corinthians 14:26-40**  
**December 1, 2002**  
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**Text Comment**

- v.26 “What shall we say, then...” amounts to “What is the upshot then of what we have been saying so far?” Remember, Paul has been making the point that the spiritual gifts have been given for the building up of Christ’s people. If they are used selfishly or improperly, then that great purpose is not fulfilled.

Insofar as it appears that the great problem Paul is addressing in this context is that of Holy Spirit-inspired utterances – it was gifts of that type that were creating the problems in their worship services, and it was the people who had these gifts who were demanding the “airtime” in the service – “hymn” and “word of instruction” should probably also be taken to belong to the same class. That is, by hymn is not meant simply that someone stands up and says he wants to sing hymn number 256. It probably refers to some singing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

- v.27 That is, Paul does not want tongues-speaking to dominate the Sunday service. And that the gift be edifying to the congregation, only one must speak at a time. Obviously Paul is correcting an abuse. The service had become a cacophony of voices as each one with a gift clamored to be heard with little regard for the effect on the congregation as a whole.
- v.28 If there is no interpreter or translator, as we said last time, the use of the gift of tongues was of blessing only to the tongues-speaker himself who found himself carried along by the Holy Spirit. Even he didn’t know what he was saying, but the experience of ecstasy was profound. But Paul requires the tongues-speaker to have that ecstasy only at home, not in the church if there is no way to translate the message for the congregation as a whole.
- v.29 There is nothing in Paul’s Greek in v. 29 corresponding to the words “what is said.” That is an interpretation on the part of the NIV and, there is reason to think, not an accurate interpretation. What Paul says is that “Two or three prophets should speak and others should “discriminate.” What is significant is that the verb “to distinguish or discriminate” occurs in a noun form in 12:10 in the list of spiritual gifts as “the distinguishing of spirits.” In other words, here in 14:29 he is talking about two spiritual gifts, that of prophecy and that of the discrimination or distinguishing of spirits. Interestingly, in 12:10, the two terms come in the same order: prophecy is mentioned and then discrimination. What is more, the other pair of gifts treated in chapter 14 – speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues – are also a linked pair in 12:10. You have the pairs in 12:10 and you have them again in chapter 14. The object of the discriminating in 12:10 is the spirit of the prophet, is it of God or man? In 1 John 4:1 we have the same put more generally: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many prophets have gone out into the

world.” Well, here was a supernatural instance of that discrimination. There were those in the church who had a gift from God to distinguish between true prophets and those who were not. No doubt, in Corinth especially, a city of trade and commerce and an important destination in the Greco-Roman world, there would have been any number of Christians passing through and some of them would have claimed the prophetic gift. What is more, the church was always growing and new folk would rise in the service claiming prophetic inspiration.

- v.33 Obviously it was characteristic for a prophet to stand up when he was given a message by the Spirit. But the Spirit, being a God of order, not disorder, if a prophecy then comes to one sitting down, the first should stop and let the Spirit speak his new message. The prophets may be under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but they are still in moral control of their actions, and obedience and order are more important than that a prophet be able to say all he has to say when he wants to say it. That is a very important observation. Even the exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is subject to moral government and the one with the gift is responsible to subject his own giftedness to that government.

If there is disorder in the Corinthian worship service, it is not God who has caused it, but proud and selfish Christians.

- v.35 Now this statement about women keeping silent raises an obvious question. Paul has already said in chapter 11 that women both pray and prophesy in the Corinthian church and, far from forbidding that practice, he simply regulates it. So, whatever speaking is forbidden here, it is not the speaking of praying or prophesying. Rather, what seems to be the case in context, is that women are not to speak in certain other ways, perhaps, though this is only a guess, in the distinguishing of prophets, as in v. 29. What speaking is forbidden, or asking of questions as in v. 35, seems to be that speaking that would put her in some role of public leadership in the church that is forbidden to her throughout the Bible and would amount to a violation of God-given order in the life of the church. That is the significance of “submission” in v. 34, a word that occurs elsewhere, as you know, in the biblical teaching regarding the relationship of genders. The term “submission” indicates that Paul is concerned here also, as in other texts, with the principle of *authority*. Women are not to exercise that in the church and Paul is concerned to maintain this order among the sexes *even during the outpouring of the spiritual gifts such as the Corinthian church was experiencing*. As a prophet, and the NT adds further evidence than simply 1 Cor. 11 that there were women prophets in the apostolic church, the authority of her words was directly from God, her voice spoke God’s words that had been given to her. Nevertheless, she is not to have authority in the church in general as the entire Bible and Paul’s explicit teaching make clear. The spirits of the prophets are subject to the laws and commandments of God. The fact is, it is absolutely characteristic of the Bible’s way of speaking that we should have women speaking with approval in one place and forbidden to speak in another. We must sort out what is approved and what is forbidden. And we do so by believing all that we are taught in the Bible and refusing to silence one text with another.

This text nowadays is so unpopular and so embarrassing to many that even standard commentaries are arguing that vv. 34-35 are not original; that Paul never wrote them. The only really convincing argument for omitting them – after all, they are omitted from no Greek manuscript of 1 Corinthians, early or late – is that Paul would not have written them, and only those who are sure that Paul was a feminist believe that.

I say again, if I am allowed to use the interpretative devices used by the so-called evangelical feminists to get the distinction of sexes and masculinity and femininity as divine callings out of the teaching of the Apostle Paul, well, I can make the NT say absolutely anything I want.

Interestingly, Paul does not specify precisely where “the law of God” says that women must remain silent in this way. Probably he means that this is the universal teaching of Holy Scripture, and, in that, of course, he was absolutely right. Women were never officers of the church, never permitted to be; never were superintendents of the worship of God’s house and were never permitted to be. Always it was obvious and was to be made obvious that, heirs together of the grace of life as they no doubt are, there is a specific and different place occupied by men and women in the kingdom of God.

v.36 Paul is bitingly sarcastic here.

v.37 Twice before Paul has taken on their bad attitude by speaking of those who think themselves one thing or another. See 3:18 and 8:2. Here he says, if you think you are spiritual, you’ve got another thing coming, because, as he has said in his argument that he is now completing, the measure of a man’s spirituality is not his having supernatural gifts, but his using those gifts in love for the blessing of others.

Now, if you read contemporary studies of this text, especially American commentators, you will discover that many draw the conclusion that we are being taught that our worship services should be free-flowing, that everyone should have a part in leading one element or another, that the historic style of Christian worship – an ordered and stable series of elements superintended by a minister – betrays this every-member involvement and contribution and leadership that is pictured here. It is particularly ironic to hear this nowadays, because even the most contemporary American worship has really moved decisively away from both of the emphases Paul makes in our text. First, of course, even in a time of remarkable and supernatural spiritual gifts, Paul forbids women to exercise those gifts in any way that blurs the biblical divide between men and women or subverts the biblical prohibition of a woman’s exercising authority in the church. Many congregations, as we know, are now ignoring wholesale Paul’s instructions on that point.

But, that is true also even in the matter of congregational participation. The new contemporary service of American Protestantism is more a service to be watched by the congregation than even the traditional Protestant service of 30 or 40 years ago. I’ve been in many of those services and there is relatively little that the congregation does except sing some songs. There is music that is sung for the congregation with the singers in the front for us to watch as they perform; there is perhaps a drama sketch for us to watch; there may be a special speaker who gives a report or

who is interviewed by the pastor, there will be in some of the more sophisticated services of this kind an elaborate and interesting audio-visual display going on during the music or the message, and there is a sermon. There is little prayer and what there is, is offered by a pastor. There is very little participation by the congregation. They are, by and large, spectators and the fact that more and more of them are sitting in theater style seats only confirms that impression.

There was a time during the charismatic movement when a more free-flowing service was more common. People would speak in tongues in the middle of the service or give a prophecy, but there is less of this now.

But, the fact is, this text in 1 Corinthians 14, is no argument for a service today in which many Christians stand up to speak. If you remove from the instruction of 1 Corinthians 14 the actual presence of supernatural spiritual gifts, what is left for our instruction in worship? Surely it is not obvious that if the gifts of prophecy or tongues-speaking or the distinguishing of spirits or the interpretation of tongues no longer exist in the church that we can make up for it with testimonies, a hymn-sing, or someone “sharing” his or her thoughts with the rest of the congregation. There may well be a place and time for all of those things, but nothing in Holy Scripture suggests that Sunday worship is that place and time. In other words, this passage does not tell us anything about *liturgy*, about the order and content of a Christian worship service. It’s subject is spiritual gifts that the Christian church does not now possess. And, to be frank, the exercise of all of those supernatural gifts – each one of them being a form of divine revelation – is now, in our day, replaced by the reading of Scripture and the sermon. In that sense, the passage is not relevant to Christian worship today. It is not relevant to Christian worship in precisely the same way in which accounts of Paul’s working miracles as he went from city to city are not relevant to Christian evangelism. Obviously we would do evangelism in a different way if Christian evangelists today could heal the sick and raise the dead and give sight to the blind. But those were gifts and powers for only a short time as the Bible itself makes clear. The ordinary run of history will not include such wonders. We must live by faith and not by sight. And so we must preach by faith and not by sight and so we must worship by faith and not by sight.

But, the fact that 1 Cor. 14 concerns the exercise of gifts the church no longer has, does not mean that the passage is irrelevant to the question of worship today.

Indeed, what is so striking about Paul’s instruction here is his concern for order, for an ordered worship that edifies, *even in those tumultuous times when the Holy Spirit was granting revelations to his people that they, in turn, could communicate to the rest of the body*. The worship service in Corinth was suffering precisely because those gifts were being exercised in a disorderly way, and, as a result, the congregation was not being edified and blessed by them. If Paul was concerned for order even when miracles were taking place in the Christian worship service, then, clearly, order and edification are matters of supreme importance, of permanent importance.

We often criticize the people who represent the other side in the so-called worship wars for designing the worship service for man and not for God. We argue that in the Bible worship should be God-centered and not man-centered. And there is truth in that, of course. If a so-

called worship service is conducted in a way that does no justice to the nature and character of God, then clearly something is very wrong. If Christian people come Sunday after Sunday into church and behave in a way we know they never would behave if they were visibly in the presence of Almighty God, then, to be sure, a habit of mind and spirit is being formed that must work against true godliness and piety. The Bible describes the situation of the unbeliever by saying that “there is no fear of God before his eyes.” And too much contemporary Christian worship seems virtually designed to make the same true of believers also. There is a familiarity, an ease, almost a glibness toward God in this worship that communicates to no one that he is a consuming fire, or that he is angry with the wicked every day, or that his eyes are too pure to behold iniquity, or that he will by no means clear the guilty, or that he dwells in unapproachable light, surrounded by a glory that no man has seen or can see. In this man-centered worship, in this worship that partakes of the atmosphere of a sales convention, the divine grace and love inevitably become mere niceness, almost politeness, not the astonishing stoop down to the unworthy and hell-deserving sinners that the Bible reveals us to be. And in that worship the cross absolutely must become considerably less than the torture and terror and the humiliation and the disgrace and the abasement of the Son of God that was absolutely required to pay the price of our sin and guilt and so satisfy the demands of God’s holiness in order that we might be saved. The cross must be lightened up. You can’t have anything that grim in a meeting whose spirit and atmosphere are so blithe and cheerful, in many ways so secular.

But, all that being said, it is certainly a mistake to think that Christian worship is only for God. It should be God-centered to be sure. We should believe God is present and act and speak accordingly, with reverence and with humble joy. We should commune with God together and say to him the things that are appropriate to say when God’s people are given an audience with him. Absolutely we should worship him from our hearts in hopes of pleasing and honoring him. We should aspire to delight God with the gifts of our praise, gratitude, and love.

But, there is no doubt that from the beginning the weekly worship of God’s people has been for their benefit and not only, not even primarily for God’s. God is not vain. He does not need our praise. He does not require that we come and pay him compliments week after week. Worship takes on its essential place in human life because it is so necessary for us!

Praise renews love. It does in every relationship. It does in a marriage. It does in a family. It does in a friendship. And it does in our relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And God knows how good it is for us to be in a close, intimate, happy relationship with him! Forgiveness, likewise, renews a relationship. And so from the very beginning, Lord’s Day worship has included the confession of sins and their forgiveness by God who receives the confession. In the liturgy of the OT sacrificial ritual the forgiveness of sins is the reason for a worshipper to appear and the forgiveness of sins is the blessing that he is given. And God knows how much better we will live and how happier his children will be, happier in the truest, deepest sense, if we are honest in the acknowledgement of our sins and if we live with a sense of the forgiveness of our sins upon our hearts. And so with the offering of prayers and the answer that God gives to them. And so with the giving of gifts and the way in which that purifies our hearts and gives a proper, life-giving place to money and to the world in our affections. And so with the hearing of the Word. How much better is life when it is being lived according to God’s truth and not the Devil’s lies. And so, finally, with the feast. What happier thing can be imagined

than to eat the best food and drink the best drink in the company of the King of Kings, and how much better a life nourished with the food he himself loads onto his table. True enough, all of this must be practiced and experienced by faith – which makes it much harder – but is this not precisely what worship is and what it is designed to do for us?

No Christian should come to God's house thinking anything else but that everything necessary for life and for happiness and for satisfaction and for fruitfulness is given to him or her in this worship service. That is why Paul was so concerned that it be orderly and that what was done be done in such a way that it genuinely edified the people of God. That is what real worship does. It may not entertain them, but it edifies them. It may not make much sense to the unbeliever who happens to be present, but it brings to the Christian the very things of which he or she most stands in need. It was a very ordered worship observed in the temple in the days of the OT, but God's people loved to participate in it for the blessings they received from it. "I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord."

It is possible, I absolutely admit, for Christian worship to be boring! Sometimes it is boring because the blessings that it offers are of no interest to the person who is present. He finds the forgiveness of sins boring and he finds the truth of God boring. We can do nothing about that. We certainly are not going to change our worship to make it interesting to someone who has no interest in those things that matter most to God and man! In that case worship would be of no use to the unbeliever *or* to the believer.

But sometimes Christian worship is boring because it is done so poorly and because those responsible for it have lost sight of its true purpose and worth. Shame on that minister and shame on that people. It should never be boring. And you parents be very careful never to let your children say or think that divine worship is boring. If loving God and singing his praise, if seeking from him and receiving the forgiveness of one's sins, (those sins that, if unforgiven would have doomed us to endless misery) if being given the opportunity to lay gifts at the feet of the King of Kings, if being given an audience and being allowed to make request of him, if hearing him address us regarding the issues of our lives, if eating a meal with him is boring, then God help us all.

It may be ordered. It may be regular, as biblical worship always was, even when miracles were taking place in it. There may be a sameness to it as has always been the case; just as there is a sameness to married love and to the life of a happy family. But it concerns and deals with those very things that make all the difference in our lives, those very things that determine whether we will be happy or sad, good or bad, and whether we will live fruitful lives or waste our short stay in this world.

Worship in Corinth was not boring in those days, but it wasn't edifying either and wasn't producing the blessing that God's people need and look for when they come to church. And it wasn't producing that blessing not because it was bereft of fabulous gifts and powers, for it had those things in abundance, but because the blessing of God's people had been lost sight of. People had forgotten what worship is for: the pleasure and honor of God and the blessing and edification of the congregation.

Sometimes people nowadays dismiss a more liturgical, a more ordered service as “worship by recipe.” The idea is that you are just repeating a formula. There can’t be any life in that! But, as so often, people who use slogans like that haven’t thought through what they have said. Would you rather eat food that was cooked without consulting a recipe? We had a number of telephone calls to our home this past week. Our eldest daughter was cooking her first thanksgiving turkey and she wanted her guests to enjoy a wonderful meal. She wanted to check the recipe and then to be sure that she was following it precisely. Why? So the turkey would turn out just right and everyone would enjoy the feast. Care about your guest and you will want a recipe!

That is what Paul is saying. There’s nothing wrong with a recipe. In fact, people are much more likely to enjoy the turkey if you use one! Everyone in the kitchen adding his own pinch of this and pinch of that is a sure way to ruin a good meal.