

ORDER IN THE HOUSE

1 Corinthians 14:26–40

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Our Scripture lesson this morning comes from 1 Corinthians 14:26–40.

“What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. Did the Word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:26–40, NIV).

We have spent the summer in 1 Corinthians 12–14. We have learned that the church, as Christ’s body, is the extension of Jesus himself. Jesus’ ministry is a ministry of words and works. He

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speaks and He does. The church as His body and the gifts which He has given to the church are simply given as the ministry of Jesus on earth might be extended. His is the one essential ministry—the ministry of Jesus.

As we have looked specifically at 1 Corinthians 12–14, we have seen that 1 Corinthians 12 describes the unity of the church in the midst of its diversity of operation. 1 Corinthians 13 describes the love which is to characterize the church and the emphasis of 1 Corinthians 14 is on building the church up. The passage today corrects two extremes. On the one hand, spiritual anarchy—where everybody does their own thing. And on the other hand, spiritual oligarchy—which is just a few doing the work of ministry.

Paul is seeking some organization in the Corinthian church. Organization is a wonderful thing. It can be bad thing. Nothing is more organized than a grave yard. And nothing is more dead.

Church can be organized, but that doesn't mean it's alive.

I. In this passage, Paul is calling for, first of all in verse 26, the involvement of every member in the life of the church.

While I was on vacation, I heard a minister who was back in the pulpit having just returned from vacation, saying that he had been to a church in Northern California. After worship, as he was leaving the sanctuary, he noticed their marquee on the outside. It said something like this:

“Ministers—every member. Assistants...” and then the names of the pastoral staff were given. I like that. That's what Paul is getting at in verse 26 of chapter 14—we're all to see ourselves as ministers.

As we look at a passage like verse 26, about coming together and everyone having a hymn or a word of instruction or revelation or tongue, it's quite obvious that we're looking at a church where their worship services had a great deal more initiative and participation on the part of

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every member than perhaps, for example, our worship service this morning. What should we say about verse 26 in reference to how the Lord leads in our worship service today?

I think we ought to avoid two errors.

One is the error of seeing this verse as regulative for all Christian worship. That is, whenever Christians gather together, they've sort of got to sit in a Quaker style until someone begins to move in one of these areas. 1 Corinthians 14:26 is a statement of fact. It describes how the Corinthians worshipped. But it is not a command. It is not a command that whenever you worship, you must worship this way. There are other kinds of church worship described in the New Testament. Worship settings that are familiar, for example, with the one that we're worshipping in.

The strong independent spirit of the Corinthians had worked against the development of effective pastoral leadership within the church and permitted a tremendous degree of individual initiative, which at times was not flowing in the controlled order that is wanted by the Spirit. So, on the one hand, we don't necessarily see 1 Corinthians 14:26 as regulative for all Christian worship.

I think that it's about principle application today—in terms of every one of us contributing, it takes place best in the context of our home Bible study groups. If, for example, the Early Church in Jerusalem grew in the first few months to ten thousand people, had they literally carried out 1 Corinthians 14:26 every time they all gathered together for worship—where everyone had a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or interpretation—the meeting would still be going on two thousand years later. So, at some point in the road, there is diversity, even within worship styles.

I think the second error that we must avoid, though, is the error of seeing this verse as a museum display for early Christian worship, and then we never use it ourselves. Again, I think the effective use of verse 26 comes especially within the home group setting. But the elements of

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worship that are being described in verse 26 are meant to describe all Christian worship, whatever style it has.

For example, each one of you has a hymn. That is to say, the initiation of worship ought to be with singing and praise. A hymn can be, in the New Testament times, an Old Testament psalm that is put to music or it can be someone that week having a fresh revelation from the Lord and a new song has been written. It could be, therefore, a psalm or a freshly composed song. Singing begins Christian worship. That's why, when we start out, we don't all read in unison from the hymnal page. Reading is a wonderful thing, but a hymn involves the soul in a unique way which spoken language simply doesn't involve. God wants us to begin with praise.

A lesson should characterize Christian worship. This is where there's a moment, in the worship service or in a small group setting, where we have a practical application of the Word of God in everyday life. We all need to know how to wrestle with life's practical dilemmas and opportunities. So drawing the Word of God into that situation gives us a lesson. There ought to be a revelation.

A lesson is, by and large, drawn from practical living or drawn from the study of the Word, a systematic study of the Word. I think a revelation comes more through prayer and through meditation before the Lord—where suddenly we receive an insight from the Spirit. It is a revelation, a vision, if you will. Paul says, in 2 Corinthians, that he abounds in revelations. We get an idea of what a revelation is like when we open the Book of Revelation and find that John, on the island of Patmos, has a revelation of the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Lord of history, in a time when a lot of Christians were wondering if the Lord had deserted His throne. A number of years ago, at a communion time, I suddenly had this revelation of finding myself at the consummation of communion, the banquet table of the Lord, the Marriage Supper of the

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Lamb. I saw myself in a large palatial banquet hall. The table spread and spread and spread. Yet it seemed small and intimate, although I knew it was huge and the tables were many and long. I remember that we were all coming into the banquet hall to take our seats at the table and let the Lord lift the cup of communion, to consummate all of this we have looked forward to. As I pulled up my chair, I could not help noticing the other people that were coming to the tables. I know, theologically, we are all to be dressed in white; but somehow, everybody was coming in the clothes of their country. What really struck me, as I approached that table, was the fact that most of the people that were coming to that table were in peasant garb or in prison uniforms. That really gave me an insight into the meaning of the universal body of Christ and the fact that, when we gather for communion, it's not just us gathering in this moment of time. But it's us gathering with the whole church of all the ages, and there will be one time when all the church will come together in one room, just like with the hundred and twenty. There will be a time when we all come back together from all places, all times, and we'll celebrate together with the Lord. A revelation. Not a lesson—a revelation.

II. Then Paul goes on to describe the proper use of tongues and prophecy.

“There ought to be,” Paul says, “a tongue with interpretation.” We remember that the tongue is an address to God. It's speaking to God. It's a pouring out of the soul to God. Therefore, the tongue, when it comes, is praying or supplicating or interceding or giving thanks. The interpretation, when it comes, will be in like character, addressing God, praising God, thanking God, supplicating God, interceding with God.

These elements are exciting elements of Christian worship and they prevent a worship service from simply being an organized routine that people go through, they're meant to liberate the spirit in the presence of God.

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Paul says that, with these elements of Christian worship, there is to be a sense of involvement that each one of us has. Each of us has a ministry within this body, too. Several weeks ago, I had a conversation with a family that doesn't attend this church. They were commenting that they were thinking about leaving the church that they had been going to for six years. One of the things that brought it to a head was that they realized that, in six years of being a part of that church body, they had never called that church "our church." They always called it "their church." There's only one way I know to make this body feel like you're a part of it and it's a part of you, and that is for us to be involved in its ministry and life. The purpose of involvement is that we might strengthen one another; not that we might put on a showcase for our talents, but to strengthen one another.

Jess Moody has a book out called *A Drink at Joel's Place* in reference to "in the last days I will pour out My spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:28). That's the drink at Joel's place. He compares the church to a bar. Some may not like this comparison. He says that there's a lot in common between a bar and a church, because they both advertise something. A bar advertises intoxication and spirits. If you, looking for intoxication and what a bar has to provide, show up at a bar and the bartender says to you, when you put your order in, "I'm sorry we're out of that. But we have milk today." You might be a wee bit disappointed and you might suffer that to happen once. But if consistently you keep coming and if consistently milk is offered in the place, you'll find another place. A bar must provide the intoxication it advertises to stay in business. Jess Moody says, "So does the church—it talks about love." The church talks about joy. The church talks about building up people. If when people come and see whether or not that's a reality, instead of love and joy and building up, they're offered negativity and criticism and tearing down and coldness and the like, then the body of Christ will lose its influence that God has called it to in

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the world. It will not provide the Christian intoxication it advertises. What a tremendous challenge to us as a body of people! To exist to not only worship and glorify the Lord, but to strengthen one another and to see all ministry that we give as being for the purpose of strengthening the body of Christ.

Paul talks about every member's involvement. Then he gives some rules concerning tongues and prophecy, in verses 27–33. He says that only one should speak at a time. There's not to be discourtesy. When tongues are given, they must be interpreted. The assumption is that, if the person has the gift of tongues and is not fully confident that there is someone there that has the gift of interpretation, or they themselves are not confident that they will have the interpretation, they're to be still and speak to themselves and to God. It is incumbent upon the gift of tongues to be offered in a public setting with interpretation.

He says, thirdly, that tongues and prophecy must be limited to two or three occurrences. That's so that there won't be so much that is communicated that people will walk out confused, with too much information. He says prophecy must be judged. That simply because someone stands up and says, "In the name of the Lord I say this," doesn't mean they really have a word from the Lord. It must be judged. How is it judged? I have some simple rules: Does it magnify Jesus Christ? Does it fulfill the purposes of prophecy which are to build up, to encourage and to console? Is it offered in the way that Christ himself would speak? An individual came to me with an extremely harsh and critical prophecy, not of me personally but of a situation. This individual said that this prophecy was from the Lord, but something in my spirit didn't bear witness to it. I was very frank with the individual and said, "My spirit does not bear witness to that. My spirit says that Jesus Christ wouldn't say that in the way that it's being said." Furthermore, I think it's very easy to cloak gossip and criticism in the spiritual cloak of prophecy. What we can't get

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away with in gossiping and criticizing, all of a sudden becomes sanctified if we hallow it with the term “prophecy.” Does it exalt Christ? Does it build up? Does it encourage? Does it console? Is it true to the Word?

Paul further says that longwinded prophets should sit down when another has something to say. It’s good for home group meetings, when one person would tend to dominate the conversation. They need to yield and let other people participate.

Prophetic expression is to be controlled by the prophet. Therefore, the prophet isn’t to interrupt someone else. And the prophet isn’t to go off into some sort of spiritual state of ecstasy that has them floating near the top of the ceiling while everybody else is on the ground. Peace, and not disorder, is to characterize Christian worship. God has not called us to confusion but peace.

One of the beautiful things that ought to be happening when we gather together for worship, I think, is described eloquently by Jacob, when he had his experience with God at Bethel. He said, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it.” That was his initial reaction. Then he goes on to say, “How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17). He’s saying that, not about a church sanctuary, but about meeting God out in an open space and the nighttime sky. Whenever we meet God, it is an awesome moment. Worship ought to lead us into the presence of God.

III. Paul then, thirdly, in today’s text, having talked about every member involvement and the use of tongues and prophecy, gives us a little teaching on women’s involvement in worship (verses 34–36).

A passage of Scripture that has been really used badly against Paul and made him appear to be a misogynist (a woman hater). I don’t think that’s fair at all to Paul, nor is it fair to the New Testament, nor is it accurately interpretive to what Paul is saying. We know that in 1 Corinthians

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11 Paul, in giving directions on Christian worship, has already not only permitted but encouraged women to be involved in the worship service in prayer and prophecy. He has placed one limitation on it, that they should wear a veil. His limitation was due to a principle—which we looked at— at the time called “headship.” A recognition of certain governing principles God has put into operation in the human race.

We said that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11, had given women permission both to pray and to prophesy in the church service. What is he saying now? Women keep silent in the church. How can that square with what he was saying in 1 Corinthians 11. Has he changed his mind? The answer is no. He hasn’t said one thing there, only to change it here.

The insight that I have into this text is from personal experience. It’s from being a missionary’s kid in the Orient, on the border of China and Tibet, and being in worship services, I think, that were very similar to the Corinthians’. Women sat on one side of the church and men sat on the other. The way it was practiced in the Hellenistic world is the way I experienced it in China. In the culture in which I was a missionary’s kid, the men, by virtue of the opportunity that culture afforded them, were by and large more educated than the women. Women would come and sit on their side, and during the course of the worship service, would talk about the affairs of the week and the interests that they had. If something was said in the service that one of them did not understand and her husband was sitting on the other side, she might call out to him. That can contribute to disorder.

Paul says, “Quit having Christian worship is such a disorderly way. Let the women keep silent in the church. Let this talking that you’re allowing cease and let this calling out in public come to an end. Let there be order in the church.” If the Corinthians think that they’re priding themselves in being such a spiritually permissive church, Paul says, “You Corinthians have got to quit

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thinking that the Word of God originated with you. You've got to avoid the mentality of a church that says, 'We're the most spiritual church.'" There are some churches that feel that way, "We're the most spiritual church in town... We're the most spiritual church in the county... We're the most spiritual church in this state... We're the most spiritual church in this country." Not at all. This church is not more spiritual than other churches. I hope it is not from the sense of looking at ourselves from the standpoint of pride and saying, "We're more spiritual." God forbid! The body of Christ as a whole is meant to be a spiritual organism, growing up in tribute to the living Lord. We take our place alongside other church bodies. We thank God for what He's doing among us. We thank God for what He's doing elsewhere. The Word of God didn't originate with us. We don't have the freedom to suddenly invent something and say we can get away with this, even though it's not in the Word of God, because we're something special, we're more spiritual. That can't be. That's corrected in the Corinthian church.

Paul closes with sort of a summary. In verses 37–40, he says, "All who express a spiritual gift must recognize apostolic authority." That's the key. There are people in the body of Christ today, in charismatic renewal, who don't recognize this principle. I've heard people talk on the subject of faith, and when it comes to looking at Paul's statements in the respect or faith and the thorn in his flesh and the like, I've heard people actually say, "But Paul wasn't well developed in that area. He was a great apostle, but in some areas he didn't have a fully sufficient faith. He wasn't fully developed." Therefore, we shouldn't look at him as a pattern. We must realize that God is doing a new thing in us now and we know more in this area now than the apostle.

That's exactly what the Corinthians were doing—denying apostolic authority. These words which Paul speaks are binding words. They're words given to him as an apostle of Jesus Christ

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to authoritatively guide the church for all ages and time. We don't have some fresh word from God that comes along and contradicts that.

“The gift of prophecy,” Paul says, “is to be encouraged. And the gift of tongues is not to be banned.” There shouldn't be an order in the church that says, “No speaking in tongues in a public setting.” But rather, when tongues occur, they're to be interpreted and to be in order.

All must be done with good appearance and order. It must appear seemly. It must be beautiful. It must be pleasing to the Spirit of God and to our spirit, as we bear witness. The end result of worship, therefore, is that, not only is God glorified, but the church is built up.

What is the bottom line of ministry in the church? The bottom line of the ministry that I have of the body of Christ results in the building up of other people.

I gained a beautiful insight into this from the ministry of our Lord. In John 17:5, He is completing His earthly ministry. It is the night before His death, before the Gethsemane experience. Jesus is praying His high priestly prayer in the presence of His disciples. He says this phrase, “Father, glorify thou Me with the glory I had with Thee before the foundation of the world.” I was reading that one day and something new struck me that I'd never seen before. It shocked me and gave me a greater reverence than I've ever had for Christ. “Glorify thou me with the glory which I had with thee before the foundation of the world.” What began to strike me about that prayer is that Jesus is at the end of three years of ministry, He's going to the cross for us, and He simply asks that when His mission is all through, that He'll be reinstated to His previous glory. He doesn't ask anything more from the Father for His years of effort living on earth as God in the flesh, our Savior. He doesn't say, “Give me greater glory than I had with Thee before the foundation of the world.” He simply says, “Restore to Me the glory I had.” I

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looked at that and thought, “What does Christ get out of the whole incarnation? What does Christ get out of the crucifixion? What’s in it for Him?”

In a theological sense, nothing really in terms of His personal self, He gains nothing. He is the eternal Son of God before He comes. And at the end, He’s the eternal Son of God. Nothing less. Nothing more. What, then, does He gain therefore? I think he gained two things. He gained scars and He gained us. Scars and us. That’s all that’s in it for Him—scars and us.

I see in Christ that perfect model of what ministry is to be in the body of Christ. It’s not “what can I get out of it?” If you’re going to teach a fourth grade Sunday School class and you’re looking for rewards, you’re not going to get paid. A lot of people aren’t going to notice you’re there. I’ll tell you the people who are going to know you’re there—the fourth graders. I hope there will come a time, ten or fifteen years down the road, in which one of those used-to-be fourth graders comes up to you and says, “I remember you. You touched my life for Jesus Christ.” That’s the pay. That’s the bottom line. Building up the body of Christ.

That’s what ministry in the church is all about. It’s so easy to put other priorities first. It’s so easy to say, “But I’ve got other things to do.” But to make a commitment to say, “My function in life, among other functions that I have, is to build up the body of Christ.” There may be nothing in it for me. There may be no pay, no recognition. Neither was there for Christ. All there was for Him were scars and people. May our ministry be given in such a way that the people of Christ, whom we love and care for, are built up in our faith.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord Jesus, we come to You in this moment with thanksgiving in our heart. You have loved us. You love us now. You will love us always. We praise You. As we come to this communion time and focus anew on worshipping You, touch our hearts afresh with the reality of Your life.

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Of our future in You. Of our redemption. Touch our hearts too, Lord, so that we want to be involved in what You're doing on earth. We will not be satisfied to simply stand on the sidelines and watch others minister. But that the Holy Spirit would come upon us and show us how we are to be at work and what our faithful responsibility is in the body. Help us, Lord, as an entire church family, to really be people who build one another up in the faith and who care enough about one another to take the time to build up. Thank You, Lord, for what You're doing. We ask for Your presence in a special way now, as we celebrate this communion together. In the name of Christ. Amen.