

# In a fitting and orderly way

*1 Corinthians*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Corinthians 14:26-40  
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As our theme, that phrase of Paul's in the last verse, everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. Church meetings in Corinth were certainly not dull. It's unlikely that you would have drifted off to sleep during a fellowship meeting of the Corinthian church, in fact, Paul thought they were a bit too exciting and he wanted to calm them down. In verse 26 he says, "What shall we say then, brothers, when you come together?" That's the subject, the meetings, how this church in Corinth, and he gives us in these verses a vivid picture of the worship and fellowship of one New Testament church.

It is, of course, an accurate picture of how the Corinthians behaved, but we shouldn't think that it is meant to be a complete picture of a typical worship service for, of course, it's nothing of the kind. Paul doesn't refer here, for example, to any reading of the Scripture and yet we know that that was an important part of New Testament worship. He doesn't refer to any preaching or teaching in the form of exposition of the word of God taking place and we know that that happened. He doesn't refer to the Lord's Supper being observed and we know that it was regularly observed when the Christians of the New Testament met together. So it's not meant to be a complete portrait of New Testament worship here, perhaps it's not even typical New Testament worship. It certainly isn't ideal New Testament worship. The reason why Paul is describing their meetings is because there were problems with their meetings. The reason why he's analyzing what goes on is that there were things going on which shouldn't have been happening, and these problems centered around an overemphasis on some spiritual gifts and the way in which they were being exercised, and it's a very suitable conclusion to his discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters 12 to 14, and Paul as he comes to this subject, identifies what is wrong with the worship in Corinth and gives some advice on how to correct what is wrong, and I think we'll see that the passage has a great deal of relevance for us today.

I want to look at it under three headings: confusion, correction and challenge. First of all, confusion. Worship in Corinth was in a very disordered state with damaging results. Paul almost begins with a tone of despair in verse 26, "When you come together, everyone has a hymn or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation," and it's only right that as a Reformed Presbyterian I should say that the Greek word translated "hymn"

is "psalmon," which, of course, means "psalm." Make of that what you will. When you come together, everyone has a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, an interpretation, on other words, it was bedlam. Many people were speaking at the same time. They were interrupting one another. You couldn't hear what people were saying. You couldn't understand them. You couldn't take in what was being said. It was a scene of confusion. It would be like having three or four taped sermons playing loudly at once in this room. How would we profit from that? There was a babble of tongues speaking with a number of people all speaking in tongues at once and people didn't understand what they were saying, they couldn't hear them properly. Everyone was coming to worship or many people were coming to worship and their minds were full of what I have to give. Paul says everyone has something. One person said, "I have a hymn." "Ah, but I have a word of instruction." "I have a revelation." "I have a tongue." "I have an interpretation." "Listen to me." "No, listen to me." "No, listen to me." Instead of thinking about God, they were forging ahead with their personal preferences. They weren't thinking about other people and their needs and their sensitivities. Everyone had something they wanted to say that they thought was important. Confusion.

There were prophets in the church and they were apparently out of control, beyond restraint. They believed that God was speaking through them and when a prophet had a message from God, he would immediately stand up and give this message, he would say, "God has given me a message," but the problem was that no sooner had he stood up with his message then someone else would say, "And God has given me a message," and he would stand up at the same time. Then a third would stand up at the same time and they would all at the same time be bringing different messages from God. Some of the prophecies weren't even from God at all, they were just made up. You can imagine the confusion and disorder and resentment. You've got a message from God and people can't hear you because someone else is interrupting you. Confusion.

Women were taking unwarranted leadership roles. I think we'd better take some time in verse 34, "women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak." What does Paul mean? Well, one thing that is clear is that he is not and cannot be commanding an absolute and permanent female silence in church meetings. That's how many Reformed Evangelicals have interpreted it today, but they are certainly wrong because that makes the Scripture contradict itself and that is something that the Bible never does. In chapter 11, verse 5, Paul says, "Every women who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head." And in verse 13 of that chapter he says, "Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her hair uncovered?" So it's clear that in the church in Corinth some women prayed and prophesied aloud in church meetings. They were not silent. They spoke and Paul did not prohibit them from speaking. He did not say they shouldn't speak, what he did say was that if they stood up to prophesy, their head should be covered.

So we can't make him contradict himself three chapters later. Paul isn't foolish enough to say in chapter 11 the women may pray and prophesy and then in chapter 14 they're not to speak at all. Now what we have to do is to look at this statement in its context and when we do so, the explanation is quite clear because there are three groups of people in this

chapter whom Paul tells to remain silent. First in verse 28, and although it's translated differently in our version, it's exactly the same Greek word, the same form of the verb in all three cases. "If there is no interpreter, the speaker in a tongue should remain silent in the church," or should keep quiet in the church. Does that mean he always has to keep quiet? No. Does it mean he is never allowed to speak? No. It simply means that in certain circumstances if there is no interpreter, in those circumstances and in those circumstances alone he is to keep silent in those circumstances. It's not permanent.

Again in verse 30, "If a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should keep quiet." The same Greek word. He should be silent. Is he always to be silent? No. Is it the case that he is never allowed to speak? No. Paul is simply saying that in certain circumstances in a specific situation, he is to be silent and that is if a prophesy comes to someone else.

So again in that same sequence in the same passage he says the women should remain silent in the church. Does that mean that they're always to remain silent? Could you not tell your child to keep quiet in church? No, it doesn't. It means that in certain circumstances, in certain situations, the women are not to speak and it's clear from the context that the situation is when the prophecies are being weighed or tested or examined by the church leaders, when the leaders were looking at a particular prophesy and saying, "Is this a message from God?" and the leaders of the church have to decide is this a genuine prophesy from God or not? Paul says in those circumstances, in that situation, the women are to keep silent, not to interrupt. That is a task for the church leaders. That is a teaching function. It is an authority function and it is in those circumstances that the women are to keep silent, but the women weren't keeping silent and they were jumping in where they shouldn't jump in and creating confusion.

So the Corinthian worship was very far from what it should be. It was very far from ideal and, really, it's foolish to see modern interpreters treating this passage as the perfect pattern for New Testament worship, the pattern that we should be imitating and following today because Paul had great misgivings about the disorder and confusion of this worship which was bringing discredit to God.

Confusion. Secondly, correction. This disorder must be brought under control. Paul says we're not to ignore the gifts of God, these spectacular gifts, we're not to suppress them. Verse 39, "Be eager to prophesy. Do not forbid speaking in tongues." He's a lot keener on prophesying obviously, but still even speaking of tongues. In those days, they had no New Testament, they had no completed Bible as we have. These gifts were given for a purpose and Paul says they're to be used, they're not to be suppressed, but he says you must exercise restraint and self-discipline and common sense.

Verse 27 and 28. Look at the wisdom of his advice. "If anyone speaks in a tongue, two or at the most three should speak one at a time," please, "and someone must interpret. If there's no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet." That's very sensible. He says, "We don't want too many tongue speakers. We don't want you all speaking at the same time so

that we can't hear you. And we want somebody to interpret so that we can understand what you're saying." That's perfectly reasonable.

Again verse 29, "Two or three prophets should speak and the others should weigh carefully what is said to distinguish true from false prophecy." You're not just to be open to everybody who likes to get up and speak. It's to be done sensibly and reasonably in order you're to think about it, your leaders are to value it, and pronounce it.

Again in verses 30 and 31, "If a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down," that always makes you smile as you listen to this advice. You can imagine what it was like in Corinth. "If a revelation comes," it's like a school teacher talking to an excitable class. "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." He's talking to them as if they were children. "There's no rush," he says. "There's no panic. You can all take your turn and then we'll all be able to hear you properly. Put up your hand, children, and stand up to speak when you're told to stand up and don't all shout at once."

Then if somebody said, "Ah, but when the Lord comes to me and the Spirit speaks to me, I have to speak out! I can't wait!" Paul says in verse 32, "the spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets." We're not like these ecstatic pagan prophets. You can control yourself. You can wait for a few moments. If this message is from God, it will wait.

Then it seems possible that some of the women had said, "Well, we're not really judging these prophecies, we're just asking questions." You see, women can get round you this way and Paul says, "Well, ladies, if you want to inquire about something, you should ask your husbands. If really you're asking questions, you don't think that you are to exert control or authority in a wrong way, you're just asking questions. If you do want to ask questions, ask questions at home. Your husband will explain it to you all night."

Here is very sane, practical, apostolic advice. Restraint, reason, self-discipline. His conclusion in verse 40, "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way." This is so important, he says, out of love for others. All must be done for the strengthening of the church, to provide a true reflection of God, verse 30. God is not a God of disorder but of peace. God isn't glorified by a babble, by a shambles, by a noisy confusion. God isn't glorified by people shouting each other down and interrupting each other, by voices that no one can understand. God is not a God of disorder but of peace. We see it in creation. God is a God of order. We see it in providence. God is a God of order, predictability. We see it in redemption. God is a God of order and the worship of his people should reflect this order, this peacefulness. One commentator says God is never confused and God never confuses.

We're back, you see, to the old problem, the problem that we've seen right throughout this epistle: what does it mean to be spiritual? The Corinthians had a very shallow, excitable, selfish view of spirituality. To them it meant shouting and noise and confusion and display. That was the mark of the spiritual person. Paul calls them back and he says,

"Spirituality is reverence and consideration for other people and self-control and love, doing everything to edify."

There is a little sting in verses 36 and 37, "Did the word of God originate with you? Are you the only people it has reached?" Are you the only church in Christendom? Are you the Mother church? Again verse 37, "If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted," of course all the Corinthians thought they were very spiritually gifted, Paul says, "let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command." The mark of being spiritual is not being pushy or noisy, arrogant or self-assertive, it is accepting the authority of those who are set over us in the Lord.

Confusion. Correction. Lastly, challenge. What has this passage to say to us? What would Paul want to say along these lines to Trinity Congregation? Would we come under this condemnation of the Corinthians? Would he say all this noise and excitement in your services, all this confusion, everybody is speaking at once, everybody wanting to participate? Do we need to be urged everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way? What's the application of this passage to our church?

I'd like to make several points. These are abuses in the worship of God. They're serious and they're damaging and the Corinthian worship was not what it should have been. I hope we all agree in that. But at least there was spiritual life. At least there were people who knew God and loved God and wanted to worship him. Their spiritual energy was leading them too far. We acknowledge that, but at least they had spiritual energy, and there is something far worse, far worse than a disorderly, over-noisy, confused meeting of Christians and that is a meeting where there is the cold decorum of spiritual death; where everything is so peaceful and so orderly and so quiet but there is little life, little zeal, little passion and longing for God. There is nothing that would disturb you. There is nothing that would alarm you. But sometimes there's nothing and I would suggest that churches of our type are far more liable to that extreme than to the extreme of over-enthusiasm. Surely, friends, it's a bad thing when churches that are cold and apathetic and listless in their Christian life and service have the nerve to criticize the excesses of people who at least are alive for God; who at least are doing something; who want to do something. It would be all too tempting and too easy for us to sit in our staidness and in our formality and in our traditionalism and look at those people and say, "Tut, tut, those noisy, disorderly people, decently and in order." And might Christ not come to us sometimes and say, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

If you were on holiday and had a choice of only two services and one was very formal, very orderly, very dignified, but cold and dead, and the other one was a very noisy, confused, exuberant, charismatic service, which one would you rather go to? I know which one I would opt for. Life every time. Every time. This was wrong. We're not defending it, but at least there was energy, life and zeal.

Then secondly, of course we don't have to settle for one extreme or the other. What we must aim at and work towards is a proper balance so that in our coming together there is

order and appropriateness and dignity and reverence, consideration for others, intelligibility, and at the same time in our coming together, there must be a place for participation by all, for every member to make a worthwhile contribution. We must have a place for improvisation, for spontaneity, for things which are not planned, things which are unexpected. We must have the freedom to do something different and to be open to the Spirit leading us. We shouldn't settle for just one or the other but we should seek to have both when we come together.

That's why in our congregation here in Trinity we have various means of coming together and our goal is to strike this balance and to cater for all the elements of Christian fellowship that we have here in the New Testament. We have our Lord's Day services. These meetings are more formal, they are more structured. This is the place where we receive authoritative teaching from the word of the Lord, to hear, to believe and to obey, where worship is led by appointed officers of the church, and in a day of raging informality, it is very important to keep these particular meetings. Then on the other hand, we have our mid-week fellowship meetings and I believe these meetings are crucial and vital for every member of this congregation for in these meetings all can contribute, everyone with no limitation or distinction. We meet together each week, we share insights, we talk of our experiences, we teach one another, we ask each other for prayer, sometimes for very personal matters, we laugh together, we weep together, we relax together, we share one another's burdens. There is the informality, the spontaneity, the participation, the unexpectedness.

We meet together for our psalm singings, and as Paul says here, everyone has a psalm, and each person is free to suggest that portion of praise which they would like and to say why, and those meetings are comparatively unstructured and free-form as the Spirit guides us and leads us.

Then in our prayer meetings and, again, all participate, men and women alike as the Spirit of God leads us and as we plead together at the throne of grace. It isn't ordered. It isn't formal. It isn't structured. We're open to the leading and the guiding of the Spirit.

We have specific fellowship groups. Women in the congregation are meeting together for Bible study. Our young people are meeting together, and there's a different ethos there in those meetings. And there are I know in the congregation, a number of one-on-one studies as two people, two men, two women, sit down together and study the word and talk and pray and minister to each other. Never mind our social occasions and our leisure occasions.

When you come together, says Paul, and that's why it is so important to have many different ways of coming together and to come together in many different ways, and I would plead particularly to you, the members of this congregation, and say to you that you need to avail yourselves of all these different comings together if you're to enjoy the full range of Christian worship and fellowship and body life. If you only come on the Lord's Day, that means your only experience of congregational coming together is formal and structured and official and you're losing out, we're losing out from your input and

your fellowship. The meetings we plan are for your benefit. It's not because we need to have so many meetings to pass an exam, it's because we think it is for the benefit of our members to sing together, to pray together, to talk, to share, to contribute, to teach, to minister. To have a well-rounded program, all must be done, says Paul, for the strengthening of the church so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.

I'm a little bit afraid that we could come to this passage and throw out the baby with the bathwater and say there's a lot of disorder, in this church, we don't want any of this, and miss the positive things, the good things. When you come together, everyone has a song or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. They're bringing that down into our area and our state. What is Paul saying there? He's saying that is something we should be doing. We should be meeting together where everyone speaks, taking turns, listening to each other, waiting for each other.

I do believe that some of you in the congregation are cheating yourselves. You're missing out. Your Christian life and fellowship is poorer than it needs to be. The opportunities are there. They are there for you. I would appeal to you from next autumn as we meet together after the holidays, look at what the church offers and say, "Here are areas where I have been missing out and where people have been missing my contribution." We would have a room on Sabbath evening would be packed to the doors. What's to prevent you coming that 30 minutes earlier and joining with us at the throne of grace? That we would not only have four weekly meetings but six or eight mid-week meetings with every family in the congregation involved not just occasionally but every week; that we'd not have just one psalm sing a month but different times when people just get together informally to praise God.

Paul says everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. Do all for the strengthening of the church. May God help us to think about New Testament fellowship and worship, to avail ourselves of all the opportunities presented in our churches that we may develop the life of the body of Christ. Amen.

Let us pray.

*Our Father in heaven, we live in a day when in many places there is little apparent reverence for you, when many of your people when they come together seem to manifest little awe, little holy fear, and there is little stress in your majesty, your transcendence, your infinite holiness and power. As we read of how your servants in Old and New Testaments were filled with profound adoration and humility before you, much of the worship of today seems trivial and jolly. We pray that your people may understand more than they do your greatness and majesty but, Lord, also we confess that all too often there is a lethargy about our worship, a lifelessness, when our whole heart and soul is not involved. Lord, instead of repenting of it, we commend ourselves on it and say that this is the dignity and order that you desire but, Lord, it's nothing of the sort, it's only an index of our own lukewarmness. O Lord our God, help us to achieve the true biblical balance. Help us to do all things in a proper, fitting and orderly way. Lord, may there be that pulsating spiritual life, that incandescent energy which springs from believer to*

*believer and enables our souls and spirits to catch fire, that we are caught up in an ardor of worship and adoration. Lord, when we meet together, help us to edify and instruct and inspire one another that the prayer of one believer may move those who listen, that we all may be moved to prayer. In our mid-week meetings as we share our lives together, Lord, we thank you for the blessing of last winter and spring, for those many nights when we were filled with such gladness and excitement and love for our brothers and sisters. Lord, as we look back at those months, we know one another better, we are closer in the Lord. Bless us, we pray, in the coming year. And for any who have not availed themselves of these opportunities, Lord, help them to realize what they're missing and give them a desire, O Lord, to commit themselves to our fellowship in all its different spheres that our church may be strengthened and glory brought to your name we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.*