

Decently And In Order

I Corinthians 14:26-40

God is a God of order.

There is not confusion or chaos within the Trinity.

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are equal in being.

But as they relate to one another, the Son and the Spirit are in submission to the Father.

And the Spirit also submits to the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are no protests within the Trinity. There is harmony.

Everything the Trinity does, the Trinity does decently and in order.

The Church is called to imitate the Trinity in that she too should do all things decently and in order.

Read I Corinthians 14:26-40.

26 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.

The worship at Corinth must surely have been interesting. I am not sure I would take verse 26 so much as normative as I would say it is descriptive. What Paul describes is more than everyone being given a role in the worship service. Although it is a good thing to use your talents to help aid the worship of God.

But what Paul describes is more than participation. Individuals were given messages from God, in various forms, to build up God's people.

"each one has a hymn"

- a psalm
- not one of the OT psalms, but a song prepared for the congregation.

My guess is that some people in the Church were given the truth of God in the form of songs. Much like God gave David, or Asaph, divine inspiration to write the OT psalms to be sung by God's people.

Many of these hymns have not been preserved. But we do see glimpses of some authoritative songs in the NT.

Most Bible scholars are convinced that Phil. 2:5-11 is taken from an early hymn sung by God's people and Paul simply inserts it into his letter.

Others may include:

Colossians 1:15-20

Hebrews 1:1-3

I Peter 2:21-25

And of course, The book of Revelation is full of hymns.

The point is that these individuals were more than talented songwriters. They were helping the early church to sing the truth of Jesus Christ as Savior of the world.

I am very much in favor of God's people continuing to write hymns for God's people. But hymn writing today should be taken from the truth already revealed in Scripture. Certainly, it can be expressed in ways that are personally meaningful to the writer, but they do not have the potential of being included in the canon of Scripture. In the early church, they had that potential. The rest of the list clearly describes word gifts. A lesson is simply a teaching or instruction of doctrinal truth. I think it is possible to fit all of these "gifts" into the overall category of prophecy. All of these forms existed, except for tongues, in the OT.

But what was new to the NT, and at Corinth, was the fact that these gifts were bestowed upon all flesh. The extraordinary gifts were not only given to the elders, but also to the rest of the members. This was in fulfillment of the prophecy declaring that the Spirit would be poured out on "all flesh" – (sons and daughters – men and women)

Acts 2:17-18 ¹⁷ "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants¹ and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

And this created an interesting conflict of authority. The person being so endowed with authoritative gifts could very easily come into conflict with those in positions of authority.

They also created a conflict between individual expression and the principle that God is a God of decency and order.

What does Paul mean by "decently and in order"? Decently basically means properly or respectably. And "in order" means with an ordered sequence.

On the one hand, you have individuals in the congregation receiving authoritative messages directly from God. And not just a couple of people; lots of them – men and women. Some of these messages were given to individuals right in the meeting. Surely, if the Holy Spirit was so inspiring an individual, they had the right to speak right then and there. Who could argue against them doing so?

The only problem was that the Spirit was so very active that multiple individuals were all being given something to say at the same time.

And what resulted was NOT "Decently and in Order".

A question that rises up in my mind is this: Why would the Spirit give so many gifts to so many people in the Corinthian Church all at once? It seems to me that God could have easily solved the problem by ordering the Spirit's work himself.

It is almost as if God wants the problem to exist in the Corinthian Church. Maybe even that God wants to use the Corinthians as an example to instruct his whole church of his priorities.

There are two established and fixed principles laid down in Scripture that Paul wants all of his people to accept.

The first is that God is not a God of confusion, but of order.

The second is that God has established clear lines of authority.

These principles (or laws of the world) are fixed. They are part of this creation. They even flow from God's character. We are not allowed to cast them away, even in the face of something so amazing as the radical pouring out of God's Spirit upon God's people.

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

Even when tongues were legitimately practiced there in Corinth, Paul was emphatic that everyone should not speak at once. The principle of building up the entire body was always the highest priority.

Even though you were being given by the Holy Spirit the special gift of tongues, that did not give you the authority to use that gift at any time or in any way. You had to follow the higher command of God to build up the body in accordance with decency and good order.

If there wasn't anyone available to interpret the one speaking in tongues, then the person having the gift of tongues simply needed to remain silent. He or she could not exercise their gift in Church.

How does Paul determine that only 2 or at most 3 may speak at any one gathering?

- It is certainly divinely inspired because it is in Scripture.
- But I think that he used his general wisdom.
- He did not want the tongues speakers or the prophets to dominate all the time in the service.
- There had to be room for teaching and praying and singing.

29 Let two or three prophets speak,
and
let the others weigh what is said. (...others may judge)

This verse raises questions. And they are difficult to answer with any certainty.

What is clear is that a worship service is not to be a free for all. Even those having heard a clear word from God had to submit the sharing of that word to the authorities in the church. They could not simply speak whenever they wanted. They had to restrain their individual expression.

Something similar was happening at Corinth. Individuals may have had great things to say, but they needed to submit them to the overall order set by the authorities in the Church. But Paul also speaks of “others weighing/judging what is said.”

Who are the others?

What is being weighed? Judged?

Who are doing the judging?

1. Other prophets.
2. Those with the gift of discernment.
3. The whole congregation.
4. The elders.

Each of these options has some merit. None of them is without its problems. I do not have the time to go into them all right now. I know that in our situation, I would want the elders of our congregation doing the weighing. At the same time, you have a responsibility to weigh everything that is said as well – like the Bereans in the book of Acts.

That brings us to the next question: What exactly is being judged?

The ESV translators believed that it was the words themselves that were being judged: weigh what is said. But the Greek simply has “let others judge”.

1. The messages themselves were being judged.
2. The prophets as prophets were being judged.

Again, coming to a sure conclusion is difficult.

If you argue for the words being judged, then one has to accept that the prophets were not really authoritative. You could pick and choose what portions of what they said were truth. That is fraught with problems.

But the Greek is not absolutely clear that it is not the words that are being judged.

The second option is that the prophets were judged as to whether they were true prophets. But it is difficult to judge the prophet without also, in some sense, judging their words.

It just gets confusing. I don't raise these questions to confuse you. I raise them to help you understand the difficulties of the passage. I think it is better to camp out on what we are certain of rather than those issues with which we do not have certainty.

And what we know for certain, is that even prophets did not have free reign in the worship service.

³⁰ If a revelation is made to another sitting there,
let the first be silent.

31 For you can all prophesy one by one,
so that all may learn
and
all be encouraged,
32 and
the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.
33 For God is not a God of confusion
but
of peace.

It was possible that while one prophet was speaking, another prophet might then and there receive a revelation from God. What is he or she to do? Sit in silence until the first speaker is finished.

“let the first be silent” could be taken to mean that the new speaker is allowed to interrupt. But I think it is better to take it to mean: let the first finish. It is simply not right for people to be speaking over one another, even if they think what they have to say is more important than what is currently being spoken.

Of course, it would be tempting to conclude, “If God gave me a new revelation while another person was speaking that this new communication took precedence over the previous one. Why else would God have given the new revelation right then?”

But Paul argues that the principle of order and the principle of decency is of higher value than individual expression of the gift itself.

“the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets”

Much false prophecy in the world was given under some sort of ecstatic state. The prophet would lose control of his or her faculties.

Not so with biblical prophecy. The divine influence did not take away that prophet’s ability to have self-control.

A prophet could not argue: I was so moved by the Holy Spirit that I lost all control. The Holy Spirit certainly is powerful. He is fully divine, which means he possesses the same power as the Father and the Son. Of course, the Holy Spirit responds to the authority of the Father and the Son. But here, Paul seems to be saying that the Holy Spirit also responds to the will of the prophet. This is mysterious to me. But I accept it. The Holy Spirit can simultaneously be working in such a way that confusion might exist, but also is purposely willing to submit to the prophet so that there will be order in the worship of God.

For God, the Triune God, is not a God of confusion.

confusion

avkatastasi,a, = instability, unrest;

Sometimes people want more spontaneity in our worship. And it is possible that we do not walk the ridge line well. But it is without question a true principle that God desires order in worship. That is why we have an “Order of Worship” every week. We are not simply giving you a bulletin. We are taking the various elements of worship that Scripture mandates and seeking to put them together in a way that is helpful to the building up of the body of Christ.

Some traditions are more liturgical. Some are not liturgical at all. We believe in some liturgy. But we also believe in spontaneity as well. We will recite the Lord's Prayer. But we will also pray extemporaneously as well. But the point in all of it is that there is thoughtfulness and preparation that goes into all of it. It is not haphazard.

Decently and in Order are a high priority in Reformed Churches: And rightly so. One aspect of orderliness is submission to authority. Prophets had to be in submission. And the pouring out of spiritual gifts on women did not exempt them from submission to authority either.

As in all the churches of the saints,

What Paul is saying is not only for the Corinthians situation alone. It can be applied in every congregation.

34 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.

This verse is challenging for many reasons.

One reason is that it goes directly against the egalitarianism of our culture. There is a strong aversion to even a hint that men are called by God to be in positions of authority. Our culture would say, "Complementarianism, the teaching that there are distinct roles for men and women in God's order, is precisely what is wrong with the Bible and Christianity". The principles of the Bible are in this way evil and should be abandoned. And even in the Church, many think that they should be viewed as antiquated at best.

But the Bible is wiser than the wisdom of this world. It is not our task to challenge God's wisdom. It is our task to submit our hearts to it in all things. The distinct roles of men and women were designed by God at creation. And they have not been abandoned. One expression of our love for God is to respect the distinct roles of men and women. If that rubs you wrong, I understand. But we don't have a right to adjust what the Bible says simply because we want it to feel better to us. It doesn't work that way. God is not conforming to us. We are learning to be conformed to him.

But issues of the roles of men and women are only one challenging aspect of this verse. There are others related to the meaning of Paul's words themselves.

At first glance, Paul's words seem clear enough. Women must be silent in Corporate Worship. How else can we understand "silence"? How else can we understand "they are not permitted to speak"?

If this verse was all that we had to go by, I think that we would be compelled to accept this meaning. It was the common understanding of this verse in the Reformed tradition up to the middle of the last century.

But this verse is not all that we have to go by.

Turn back to I Corinthians 11:5.

ESV **1 Corinthians 11:5** but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head - it is the same as if her head were shaven.

This verse has its own challenges. But what is clear is that God poured out his Spirit on such a way that women were prophesying. They were praying as well. That is not silence. The older commentators believed that this praying and prophesying by women only occurred apart from the formal worship service. But I Corinthians 11 has corporate worship in mind. In that chapter is the passage regulating the Lord's Supper – clearly an element of corporate worship.

The fact that Paul recognizes women praying and prophesying in Church in the same letter compels us to look for other ways to understand Paul's meaning in chapter 14. This is not the same thing as explaining away Scripture because we do not like what it says. In this case, it is the Bible itself that is the motivation.

Are there other legitimate ways to understand "silence" and "speak" that do justice to the overall understanding of the book of Corinthians? I believe that there are. But I also admit that my level of certainty is not as high as I might like.

Before I try to explain how to take these words, I want to lay out the big picture principles going on.

First, at creation God established that men are given the responsibility of having authority. Women are called by God to help men in their responsibility. This principle is taught in the way that God created man and woman. Man was created first. Woman was taken from man and comes alongside of him. Together they fulfill God's purpose. Of course, it is in the marriage relationship that the roles of men and women are most intimately worked out.

But the Bible everywhere recognizes the authority of men in the Church as well. This is a non-negotiable principle. We may rightly differ as to specific applications of the principle in daily life. But we must not fight against the principle itself. If we do, we fight against God who established the principle in the first place. Men, you are responsible to lead. You are not called to lead because you are better, or because you are more gifted. You are called to lead because God has commanded that you lead. And in your leadership, you are called to serve. Jesus did not lead by selfish domination of women. He led by humble service. But he led.

So, how do we understand verse 34?

It is challenging. But it is a challenge that God has created. Why do I say that? Because God is the one who was pouring out his Spirit on women in the same way that he was pouring out his Spirit on men. If God had only gifted men with the gift of prophesy, we would not have the struggle.

So, there are two principles at work. And God has established both of them.

1. Men are placed in the role of authority by God.
2. Women are given spiritual gifts that imply authority.

In Corinth, some were concluding that because of second reality, the first principle no longer applied. There are many who make the same conclusion today. But Paul clearly tells us that this is a wrong conclusion. The first principle continues to apply.

Our task is to understand this passage in a way that does not nullify either one or two.

34 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.

Is it possible to understand, “keep silent” and “not permitted to speak” in some other way than absolute silence?

I believe there is.

Paul mentions the Law in support of his point. But there is no OT law that commands silence of women at the Temple. The only place that we can go in the OT that gives support to Paul’s point is Genesis 2 and the creation of Adam and Eve. Adam was created first, and Eve was created as a helper for Adam. But this is not a command for silence. It simply establishes the principle of male headship.

Next, Paul has been talking about the weighing or judging of prophets.

29 Let two or three prophets speak,
 and
 let the others weigh what is said. (...others may judge)

The activity of judging is certainly an authoritative action.

It is likely that Paul is referring to this activity of judging prophets.

It is even possible that the situation that arose, of which Paul was made aware, that a man rose up to prophesy, and his own wife, challenged his authority as a prophet. A woman was not to challenge the authority of her husband by challenging his authority as a prophet – even if she herself was a prophet.

There are difficulties with this position. Look at vv. 35.

35 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 language of verse 35 does not seem to fit very well.

Paul says that the woman should fulfill her “desire to learn” at home, alone with her husband.

Desire to learn does not sound like challenge or judge. This is why I respect those who argue for absolute silence of women in Church.

If we did not have I Corinthians 11:5 I might be persuaded of this position, as difficult as it is.

I don't have a perfect answer.

But I have enough of an answer that I am satisfied that I am not simply reading into Scripture what I want to read into Scripture.

Paul says that it is shameful for a woman to speak in Church. For the life of me, I cannot see how a humble and teachable attitude of asking questions is shameful for anyone at any time. Mary sat at Jesus' feet learning from him. I have taught many years and cherish when a student asks sincere questions. When Lazarus dies, Mary and Martha both come to Jesus with questions. He does not rebuke them as acting shamefully. I know that this is not worship. But it was public enough that others were aware of the conversation.

By making the statement, "It is shameful for a woman to speak" I believe we have to conclude that Paul is referring to speech that in some way challenges the authority of the one already speaking. That would be shameful. There ought to be a true respect of authority.

And, in the case of a husband and wife, even when they get home, the wife should still respect the authority of her husband. It is not as if in the privacy of their own home she no longer has to respect her husband.

This is why I think Paul uses the language he does: "desire to learn... ask their husband" A wife might sincerely want to challenge her husband. She should not do this in the worship service. But she should do it in the privacy of their own home. And she should attempt to do it in a way that still acknowledges her husband as her authority.

This walks a fine line. But it is the line we must walk.

Husbands, you should want your wife to have the freedom to speak freely with you. She should even feel the freedom to "question" you at times. You may want to tell her to be silent. But if you are wise, you will listen to the wisdom of your wife.

At the same time, wives, while you are doing this, work hard to continue to respect your husband and the position in which God has placed them.

Where does this leave us practically today? In worship, respect for authority should be recognized by all. In our congregation, the elders, ruling and teaching elders, are in positions of authority. Our authority is not absolute. The Bible is our absolute authority.

And there may be times when we might need to be challenged by those under our authority, particularly if what we are teaching is not in accord with the Bible.

But even that challenge should be done in a respectful way.

The office of elder is only open to men. Not because women are not smart enough or gifted enough to fulfill it well. But because it goes against the principle of male headship in the Church.

But, as long as the principle of male headship is recognized, women should have the freedom to speak in various ways, even in worship. Your leadership here at Faith encourages this. I know that working out the precise line can be murky.

But we do not want to stifle the participation of women in our fellowship. We want to encourage it.

36 Or
 was it from you that the word of God came?
 Or
 are you the only ones it has reached?

V. 36 – is spoken to the Corinthians, who considered themselves an exception to the rule since they had been given so many spiritual gifts.

Paul puts them in their place.
You may think you are unique, but you are not.

37 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.
38 If anyone does not recognize this,
 he is not recognized.

The Apostles had foremost authority in the Churches. Prophets did not have the right to oppose the Apostles. Submission to Apostolic authority was a sign of being a true prophet. Basically, if a prophet, or one who claims to be a prophet, does not recognize the authority of Paul's teaching on this subject, Paul commands the church to not recognize them. They would be prevented from having an opportunity to speak.

39 So, my brothers,
 earnestly desire to prophesy,
 and
 do not forbid speaking in tongues.
40 But
 all things should be done decently and in order.

These verses summarize Paul's teaching:

Spiritual gifts do not negate the principle that all things in worship should be done decently and in order.

We may debate whether or not a particular gift exists today, but what we all should agree upon is that God expects the Church to lead, and worship to be conducted "decently and in order." It is a shame that many Christians think that worship conducted "decently and in order" somehow squelches the Holy Spirit. Quite the opposite is true. Where things are done decently and in order, there you will find the Holy Spirit. Amen.