

THE PLACE OF TONGUES AND PROPHECY IN THE CHURCH

1 CORINTHIANS 14:26–40

Introduction

This passage throws a great deal of light upon the worship services of the early church. Note two things in particular. First, Paul is stressing flexibility, but with order and dignity. Second, the primary purpose for worship is edification. The subject is the place of tongues and prophecy in the church. Five rules are given to control the worship services.

- I. Rule 1: the guiding principle — gifts are to be used in church only to edify people (v. 26).
- II. Rule 2: tongues are to be limited and interpreted (vv. 27-28).
- III. Rule 3: prophecy is to be limited and discerned (vv. 29-33).
- IV. Rule 4: women are to keep silent in the church — not to exercise the gift of tongues in the church (vv. 34-35).
- V. Rule 5: guard against the potential abuses of the gifts (vv. 36-38).
- VI. Conclusion: the final rule and charge (vv. 39-40).

I. *1 Corinthians 14:26 Church Worship — The Guiding Principle*

Rule one is the guiding principle — gifts are to be used in church to edify people. The worship services in the Corinthian church had become very disorderly — confusion prevailed. Many were speaking in tongues, talking, praying and singing their own personal songs — all at the same time. Each person was struggling for the right to share his latest inspiration and spiritual insight. Note exactly what is said and the disorder is clearly seen: “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together everyone...”

- has a hymn [song, Greek],
- has a word of instruction [some teaching],
- has a revelation [some spiritual insight],
- has a tongue or an interpretation.

The worship services had degenerated into utter disorder and mass confusion. To the visitor, the services were hardly more than an *uproar* of mumbo jumbo and gibberish. Everyone was talking and doing his own thing — all simultaneously. Pride, puffiness, self-centredness, super-spirituality and division prevailed instead of love, respect, humility, unity and edification. Decency and orderliness were totally lacking.

1 Cor 14:23 So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

The situation had to be straightened out or else the church would never be effective in its witness for the Lord. The primary answer to straightening out the disorderliness lay in the believers learning the purpose for their gifts: to edify and build up the church. Note how often this chapter stresses the point of edification:

1 Cor 14:3 But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.

1 Cor 14:4...He who prophesies edifies the church.

1 Cor 14:5...That the church may be edified.

1 Cor 14:12...Try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

1 Cor 14:17 You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.

1 Cor 14:19 But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

II. *1 Corinthians 14:27–28 The Use of Tongues in Church*

Rule two is that tongues are to be limited and interpreted in church. Note several points.

1. Only two persons, at most three, were allowed to speak in tongues during one service.
2. “One at a time” means either in turn or else an equal share of time. There was to be only one person at a time speaking in tongues. There was to be no disorderliness or confusion.
3. There was always to be an interpreter. If there was no interpreter present, then the tongue speaker was to keep silent and speak only to himself and to God.
4. The person who speaks in tongues has control over his gift. The gift is not what it is commonly thought to be: a spiritual impulse from the Holy Spirit that the person cannot resist. He not only *can* control his tongue speaking, he is to control it.
5. There may be some merit to the idea that the best course was for tongues not to be used publicly, but Paul just could not run the risk of stopping the Corinthians from using the gift of tongues in worship. It was too embedded and too violent an issue. To have insisted on its public demise would have immediately alienated too many from his influence, and perhaps even have caused the church to reject his ministry entirely. Just think of Paul in a distant city. Remember how the church was attacking him and his ministry — laying charge after charge against him (see note, 2 Cor. 1:12). Would it even be possible to correct the abuse? Could he possibly correct it without alienating many fine, but ill-advised believers? If so, how was he to do it? What approach was he to use? Was he to suggest they cut off the practice entirely in public worship, or was he to allow its exercise in *moderation*?

The whole tone of the passage seems to point to the latter idea.

=> Tongues are said to edify self while prophecy edifies the church (cp. vs. 1-25).

=> Tongues are said to be an extremely sensitive gift with the potential of causing severe problems (1 Cor. 12:1-3; 14:6-14, 36-40).

=> Paul's own practice of tongues was only in private (1 Cor. 14:15-20).

=> Paul's statement is undeniably clear: he would rather speak five words that can be understood than to speak ten thousand in a tongue (1 Cor. 14:19).

Throughout this passage one point is undeniably seen: the heaviest weight rests with the idea that tongues are best used for private and not for public use. However, if a church or a people absolutely insist on the use of tongues in church services, only two, and at most three persons are to exercise their gifts. And even they are to keep silent unless a known interpreter is present.

III. 1 Corinthians 14:29–33 Prophecy to be Limited during Worship

Rule three is that prophecy is to be limited and discerned. Note several points.

1. Only two or three prophets are to speak in a single service.
2. The word “others” is plural in the Greek. The others are probably the same persons who were mentioned earlier, those who are mature enough and gifted with the ability to discern what is being proclaimed.
3. If another person who is listening receives some special insight into what is being proclaimed by a speaker, the speaker is to allow the person to share his insight.
4. All prophets in a church were to be allowed to speak. However, they were not all to speak in the same service. The rule that only two or three could speak in a single service had already been laid down.
5. Every true prophet has a significant message and contribution to make to the church. This is seen in the words “in turn.” All the prophets were needed “so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged” (v. 31).
6. The spirits of the speakers are to be controlled by the speakers. Again, gifted believers, no matter the gift, are not overcome by an irresistible surge of the Spirit — not to the point that they cannot control themselves. No two speakers are to try to speak at the same time. The simplest of reasons is given: “God is not a God of disorder but of peace.”
7. The statement is strong: “God is not a God of disorder, but of peace” (v. 33). All churches which allow confusion and disorderliness are strongly rebuked by the statement. Their disorderly services are of self, not of God.

IV. 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 Women are to be Silent in the Church

Rule four is that women are to keep silent in the church — they are not to exercise the gift of tongues in the church. Note two points.

1. An interpretation of these verses must keep in mind the context of chapter 14. To lift these verses out of context does violence to Scripture and to the high esteem with which Christ and the New Testament hold women. Paul mentions this matter because women were probably the ones most abusing the gift of tongues and the predictive element of prophecy. Paul's charge is for the women to calm down and keep quiet, to bring things into order. The passage is directed both to the local problem of the Corinthians and to any other church where women are abusing the gifts of tongues and the predictive element of prophecy.
2. Most commentators interpret this passage by saying that it must be understood in the context of its day. Barclay's comment on these verses is an example: "In all likelihood what was uppermost in his mind was the lax moral state of Corinth and the feeling that nothing, absolutely nothing, must be done which would bring upon the infant Church the faintest suspicion of immodesty. It would certainly be very wrong to take these words of Paul out of the context for which they were written and make them a universal rule for the Church."
3. Whatever this passage is saying, it is not disallowing women from participating and sharing their *gifts* in the church. Other Scriptures are clear about this:

Acts 2:17 "...Your sons and daughters will prophesy..."

Acts 21:9 He [Philip the evangelist] had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

Paul clearly recognized the fact: "And every woman who prays or prophesies" (1 Cor. 11:5).

V. 1 Corinthians 14:36–38 Potential Abuse of Spiritual Gifts

Rule five is to guard against three potential abuses of the gifts.

1. Abuse 1: thinking that you are the only teacher; that is, that you have something that no one else has:
 - => some truth
 - => some insight
 - => some revelation
 - => some understanding

Such an attitude is not only full of pride and puffiness, it is a claim to be the originator and source of truth, to be like God Himself.

Thought 1. Too many persons and churches act as though they are the creators and originators of God's Words.

2. Abuse 2: thinking that God speaks only to you. Too many believers and churches think they are special to God, and that God gives them truth and insight that no one else receives. The result is conceit, arrogance, criticism, judging, censoring and divisiveness.

3. Abuse 3: thinking that you are more spiritual than others. The rules laid down by Paul were commandments from the Lord. Every prophet and every spiritual person must acknowledge the fact and obey the rules. However, there were some in Corinth who had rejected Paul and the rules God had given him. They thought their gifts of prophecy and spirituality placed them above the rules and gave them the right to exercise their gifts as they felt led.

Paul says no! “Let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command.” If anyone refuses to accept and follow the rules, then let him remain in his ignorance. Note: there is a suggestion of judgment in this statement. God will eventually take care of him who rebels and continues to selfishly act in ignorance.

VI. 1 Corinthians 14:39–40 Conclusion

The conclusion is a final rule and charge.

1. Covet the best gift, which is to prophesy (cp. 1 Cor. 14:1-5).
2. Do not forbid speaking with tongues. Remember, however, an interpreter must always be present.
3. Do all things decently and orderly in worship. However, note a crucial fact: this does not mean that a service is to be so formal that it is stiff and cold. The picture painted by Paul throughout the present passage is orderliness with congregational participation, and the participation was not limited to singing and the giving of offerings. Individuals within the congregation were allowed to share spiritual insights given them by God — even during the main prophetic proclamation (sermon). The services were not staid and restrictive. They were orderly, but they were also flexible enough to allow two or three of the laity to participate, even on the spur of the moment.

1 Cor 7:17 Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches.

1 Cor 14:23, 40 So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Titus 1:5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. ■