

Decently And In Order

1 Corinthians 12-14
Chapter 14:20-40

Introduction

It has been said that “Church government is the best security for Christian liberty.”¹ Many Christians today would scoff at such a proposition. Government is cold, rigid, and bureaucratic; it is unwieldy and inflexible in its administration. This is unlike our relationship with God which is alive and fluid—unhindered by boards and councils.

But it is the church government (hopefully with Scriptures in hand) that determines the liturgies and doctrines of the church. And as un-tethered as we all fantasize ourselves being from the influence of men—even godly men, things we understand to be the truth about God are primarily influenced (not by our personal Bible reading) but by those who have ascended to levels of theological influence.

This can easily be seen by the vast numbers of today’s media-driven Christians who hold views they believe to be biblical but lack warranted scriptural precedent, e.g. asking Jesus into your heart, baptism as a sign of my decision to believe in Jesus, the law is not for today’s Christian, it is God’s plan that the world must get worse, it is God’s will that everyone be healed, and on and on. My inspiration for this current series was the recognition that most of what I was taught, and believed, as a young Christian was incorrect.

The majority of these types of errors in Christendom are doctrines people believe to be truly scriptural. They believe this because those in authority in the church have presented these notions as if they were clear teachings in the Bible. And since it is the very nature of error (especially misrepresentations about God) to cause turmoil and bondage, the above quote proves quite true.

In 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul is addressing a church that had lost control of itself. Things were hopping down at the Christian center in Corinth. God was alive and at work. They inventoried themselves as very spiritual but Paul’s letter was designed to illumine them that they were missing the mark. Spontaneity and hoopla do not equal spirituality; even in true churches where the true Spirit of God is truly operating. Things must be done decently and in order. What’s at stake here is not merely my Sunday morning experience but my entire view of God, His world, and my place in it.

The Power of God’s Word in the Church

Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature.

²¹ In the law it is written:

“With men of other tongues and other lips

I will speak to this people;

And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,”

says the Lord.

¹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. 1997. *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (1 Co 14:40). Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA.

²² Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. ²³ Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in *those who are uninformed or unbelievers*, will they not say that you are out of your mind? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. ²⁵ And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on *his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you (14:20-25).

An Immature Church

Once again Paul condescendingly rebukes the church at Corinth. Numerous were their errors: unnecessary factions (chapters 1-3), unchecked gross immorality in the church (chapter 5), frivolous lawsuits (chapter 6), marital problems (chapter 7), insensitively eating food sacrificed to idols (chapters 8 and 10), stinginess in giving (chapter 9), abusing the Lord's Supper (chapter 11) and finally, the issue before us—the improper and infantile brandishing of the Spiritual gifts.

Paul exhorts them to be mature in their understanding but childlike regarding malice—they were just the opposite. Mature Christian knowledge was expendable and as a result the church was descending to the “Lord of the Flies” (governed by malevolent children). And such will always be the case when the church is committed to ignorance.

The Sign of Tongues

Light is shined on the reason for tongues—a light all but ignored by many popular expositors and Pentecostals. “**With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people...**” is a quote from Isaiah 28. It is a passage where God is declaring His judgment upon Israel by a foreign nation. They would not heed God's call to repent and, therefore, would hear from God by way of alien oppressors.

Tongues were a sign, a sign of impending judgment not for the believer but the unbeliever—not for the one who would willingly repent but for the one who bulled his neck against God's goodness. In the same way the parables hid the kingdom of God from the hardened hearts of apostate Israel, tongues hid the gospel from apostate Israel. We see this foretold in the initial sermons of John the Baptist and also with the statement made by Simeon regarding Jesus.

Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, “Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel” (Luke 2:34).

There is little doubt that many Jews came to faith as a result of this prophetic sign, but others fell. The destruction of the temple and the siege of Jerusalem by Rome in A.D. 70 were utterly devastating to the Jews who had rejected Christ (Matthew 24). Paul is reminding them of one of the dramatic purposes for tongues. Sobering, it should have been, for them to recognize their gift was a sign of judgment.

And it is strained exegesis to argue that practicing the sign of judgment (a judgment that already happened) should be the normal observation throughout the history of the church. In other words, if tongues were a sign of the judgment of Israel, and Israel was in fact judged, there is no longer any need for the sign. Signs point to things. And the thing to which tongues pointed has already taken place. In short, tongues were a sign that B.C. was about to end and A.D. was about to begin.

The Power of God's Word

Paul's point in the passage above is that the confusion of not understanding tongues is for the hardened unbeliever and that understanding is for the believer (or potential convert), hence the superiority of prophecy (or interpreted tongues). If a person, by the grace of God, enters the church, they should be able to understand what is being said. The uninformed, hearing the very Word of God (see Hebrews 4:12) becomes convinced, convicted, and falls on his face before God. He will also be able to give a report that God is truly in that place. Paul never strays too far from the power of the propositions of God.

Edifying Words

How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret (1 Corinthians 14:26, 27).

Hard to Imitate

Since we discussed this last week I will not go into detail here. Paul's main point is that the church service should operate in such a way that everyone would be edified by understanding what is being said. You may wonder why the church throughout history never adopted the above model for its order of worship. And the few churches that have attempted to imitate Corinth have ended in deplorable theological failure. The answer relates to the topic of this sub-series—the cessation of supernatural gifts.

We must be aware of the fact that the New Testament had not yet been completed. So the means of revelation was quite unique and not what one should expect once the canon of Scripture was complete. Today we are not receiving prophecy beyond what is written for we have the full and sufficient prophetic Word of God contained in the Scriptures.

We might initially lament at this. Wouldn't it be wonderful to be continually receiving these prophetic insights? But as the church has grown to be an international force, we recognize that it is actually to the church's advantage not to have a multitude of prophets since a multitude of prophets would also burgeon a multitude of false prophets. God has so protected His church that we can easily know someone to be a false prophet simply by their claiming to be a prophet at all. The church has one glorious prophetic source which is sufficient to meet all genuine spiritual needs—the Bible.

Keep Silent

But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God (1 Corinthians 14:28).

This is another verse often used to advocate a private prayer language. But since tongues are actually speaking and Paul's exhortation here is to keep silent one can hardly understand this to mean any type of verbal utterance. Paul is simply instructing a person who has the gift of tongues not to use that gift if there is no interpreter. He is to remain silent and engage in silent prayer.

The Spirits of the Prophets

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge.³⁰ But if *anything* is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent.
³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged.³² And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.
³³ For God is not *the author* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (1 Corinthians 14:29-33).

Controlled Prophecy

It shouldn't take too much ciphering to conclude that this type of worship simply could not be the norm for the perpetuity of the church. Prophets were speaking the Word of God in the church but since false prophets were a possibility they needed to be ferreted out through the judgment of others. When one considers the poor spiritual climate of this church we can surmise that this was not always done at an efficient level. Praise God for the closed canon of Scripture.

Be that as it may, Paul's instruction was that there be one prophet at a time that all may learn (again the importance of understanding) and be encouraged. When Paul tells them "**the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets**" he is not saying that the prophets have authority over the content of what they say. The context informs us that Paul is telling the prophets that they have control over the manner in which they utilize their gift. Simply because it was the actual prophetic gift does not mean they had to bark out their prophecy at the moment they received it. To do so would result in confusion.

Women in the Church

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law also says.³⁵ And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church (1 Corinthians 14:34, 35).

The context of this very controversial passage is the exercise of prophetic gifts in the church. There were women prophets (Acts 2:17; 21:19) but they, apparently, were not to exercise that gift in the context of the church. Adding to the pandemonium at Corinth were women asking questions during church. Paul instructs them to do this at home with their husbands.

Implied here is propriety in the church service. People talking or interacting or children crying at a level that is so distracting that it hinders the order of the service should be avoided (we can probably add cell phones, video games, and beepers to the list). For this reason churches have implemented extensions of the sanctuary such as cry-rooms or toddler training rooms.

So You Think You're Spiritual

Or did the Word of God come *originally* from you? Or *was it* you only that it reached?³⁷ If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.³⁸ But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant.³⁹ Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues.⁴⁰ Let all things be done decently and in order (14:36-40).

There is a bit of sarcasm in Paul's tone when he asks if the Word of God originated with them; are they supposing that they were the beginning of all truth? Even when prophetic gifts were extant the prophets had to acknowledge that the Word of God did not originate in them but was rather a gift given to them.

The apostle Paul, because of the greatness of the revelations given to him, was given a thorn in the flesh that he might not exalt himself. There is a temptation for those who represent God to get too big for their britches. Heaven forbid that men who handle the Word of God forget where it ends and they begin.

Paul appeals to his apostolic authority in addressing the order of worship. This is yet another argument for cessation. Paul is not available today to address the specific errors of so-called prophetic utterances. It is supposed that we can distinguish today between true and false prophets by checking them against the Scriptures. But this is a shortsighted remedy. If it is already in the Scriptures, why do I need the prophet? And if it is so specific that the Scriptures don't address it, how can I check it? If the modern day prophet says you should quit lying, all he has done is quote the Scriptures. If he says you should move to Orange County, how can you check that against the Scriptures?

If people wished to willfully ignore Paul's writing, so be it—Paul writes, **“Let him be ignorant.”** But he shouldn't delude himself into thinking he is being spiritual. Certainly Paul allowed prophecy and tongues at the church at Corinth. All must stipulate to this. But, again, that does not address the continuation or cessation of those gifts throughout history.

Review

Reviewing some of the main points of 1 Corinthians 12-14, we learned:

- 1) Christians should avoid using the same methods governing the church that they used to govern their lives as unbelievers (12:1-3).
- 2) Differential distribution and mutual edification are essential to understand the gifts. The church is a body with multiple gifts (12:4-11).
- 3) The entire church has been baptized into one “body” even though not all speak in tongues (12:13, 14, 30).
- 4) There is no biblical reason to think there are multiple types of tongues.
- 5) Love must be the controlling disposition in the use of gifts (chapter 13).
- 6) Prophecy is superior to tongues because it can be understood (chapter 14).
- 7) Interpreted tongues are prophecy (14:5).
- 8) Language needs to be understood in order to be valuable (14:6-8). Understanding was necessary even in the first century (14:14-16).
- 9) Tongues were a sign of judgment (14:20-25).
- 10) A church service should be orderly and well understood (14:26-40).

It has been the headlong pursuit of the enemies of Christ's church to quell, pervert, or eliminate altogether the glorious message that there is a good, holy God who saves sinners by grace through faith. It is the zenith of human endeavors to apprehend the depth of such glorious news. Let it continually be our pursuit. Herein lies the heart of the Apostle's prayer for us

...that __the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, __may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, ⁻¹⁸⁻ __the eyes of your __understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is __the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the

glory of His inheritance in the saints,⁻¹⁹⁻ and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, __according to the working of His mighty power⁻²⁰⁻ which He worked in Christ when __He raised Him from the dead and __seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*,⁻²¹⁻ _far above all __principality __and __power and __might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come (Ephesians 1:17-21).

Questions for Study

1. Why is proper church government important (page 1)?
2. Discuss some of the shortcomings of the church at Corinth (pages 1, 2).
3. Of what were tongues a sign (pages 2, 3)?
4. Why is it difficult to use Corinth as a model for the church throughout history (page 4)?
5. In what respect are the spirits of the prophets subject to the prophets (pages 4, 5)?
6. What is the context of women remaining silent in the church (page 5)?
7. Discuss propriety in the church service (page 5).
8. What is a temptation for people with high profile spiritual gifts (pages 5, 6)?
9. Review chapters 12 through 14 (page 6).
10. What is the greatest pursuit of man (page 6)?