

Challenges Christians Face

Proper Order in the Church Meeting

1 Corinthians 14:26-33

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Proper Order in the Church Meeting

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of spiritual gifts. Let's learn more about that in a message I am calling, "Proper Order in the Church Meeting."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 14:26-33a:

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. 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. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. 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. (1 Corinthians 14:26-33a)

Introduction

The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians is a very important letter in the Bible. As you know, the Apostle Paul planted the church in Corinth. He had moved away, but he was still very concerned about the welfare of the church.

He had received communication from the Corinthian Church in which they had asked him to address a number of challenges that were facing the Christians in the church. So, *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* is a letter intended to address various

challenges that the Christians in Corinth were facing.

One of the challenges facing the Christians was the issue of spiritual gifts. Beginning in chapter 12 (“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers,” v. 1) and continuing all the way to the end of chapter 14, the Apostle Paul addressed the issue of spiritual gifts.

In chapter 14 Paul wrote about the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy. The church in Corinth was very confused about the proper use of the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy, not unlike some churches in our own day.

Now, *prophecy* is the proclamation of God’s truth. While it could have an element of “fore-telling” the future, it usually dealt primarily with the “forth-telling” of God’s truth to people.

Tongues was used in 1 Corinthians in two senses. In one sense it was used of unintelligible gibberish, and in the other sense it was used of understandable language.

In the first five verses the apostle compared prophecy and tongues, and concluded that prophecy was superior to tongues.

As we have already learned in our study of chapter 14 so far, Paul used the word “tongue” in both the singular form and the plural form throughout chapter 14.

Paul used the singular form for “tongue” in verses 2, 4, 13, 14, and 19 to indicate unintelligible gibberish, the kind of tongues similar to pagan and ecstatic utterances. These were false tongues.

Paul used the plural form for “tongue” in verses 5, 6, 18, 22, 23, and 39 to indicate an understandable language. These were true tongues.

The only exception is found in verses 26 and 27, our text for today. In today’s text, the singular form of “tongue” is used to refer to a person speaking a genuine, understandable language.

Lesson

In today’s lesson, we learn that there must be proper order in the church meeting.

Let’s learn about this as follows:

1. The Exhortation Regarding Proper Order in the Church Meeting (14:26)
2. The Regulations for Tongues (14:27-28)
3. The Regulations for Prophecy (14:29-31)
4. The Admonition Regarding Proper Order in the Church Meeting (14:32-33a)

I. The Exhortation Regarding Proper Order in the Church Meeting (14:26)

First, notice the exhortation regarding proper order in the church meeting.

It is helpful to keep in mind that everything we do in our lives is undergirded by what we believe. There are a number of ways in which this is often expressed.

We talk about doctrine and duty, belief and behavior, faith and practice, or “faith and life,” as our *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it in chapter 1, section 2.¹

The Bible always gives a doctrinal basis for our Christian behavior. There is always a theological reason to do what we are called to do.

For example, in his letters, Paul always first set down doctrine before he turned to the duty that arose from that doctrine. So, in his letter to the Romans Paul used the first eleven chapters to set down doctrine before he listed the duties that arose from that doctrine in chapters 12-16.

Similarly, Paul used the first 25 verses of chapter 14 in First Corinthians to set down the doctrine regarding the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy before he turned to the duties that arose from that doctrine.

The main emphasis in verses 26-40 is the biblical regulation for the use of tongues and prophecy in the church meeting.

So, Paul said in verse 26a: **“What then, brothers? When**

¹ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.”

Apparently, when the Christians in the church at Corinth gathered together, **each one had a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.** The context seems to indicate that they all wanted to speak at the same time. They did not seem to be interested in serving others, or learning, or edifying one another, but only in their self-expression. Everyone vied for attention and preeminence!

Of course, this was chaotic! And Paul wanted to correct this cacophonous church meeting!

Before we look at Paul’s exhortation regarding proper order in the church meeting, let’s briefly note the elements Paul mentioned that were being used in the church meeting.

First, Paul said that **each one has a hymn.** This most likely referred to the singing of one of the Old Testament Psalms, although it could also have referred to a hymn that someone in the congregation had written.

A **lesson** was just that: a lesson from the Bible that conveyed biblical truth.

A **revelation** was some truth that God was giving to his people.

A **tongue** in this case, even though it is in the singular form, was a genuine, understandable language.

And an **interpretation** referred to the ability to interpret the language that had just been spoken in the church meeting.

Then, Paul gave his exhortation regarding proper order in the church meeting. He said in verse 26b: **“Let all things be done for building up.”**

The Greek word for **building up** (*oikodome*) literally means “house building,” as in, the construction of a house. Figuratively, it refers to growing, improving, or maturing. The spiritual lives of Christians need to be built up and improved, expanded to fullness and completeness. The primary responsibility of Christians to each other is to build each other up. **Building up** is a major responsibil-

ity of pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11-12), but it is also the responsibility of all other Christians as well.

Every Christian is called to **build up**. Look at the following passages:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:11: “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.”
- Romans 15:2-3: “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself.”
- Matthew 20:28: “Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus did not seek what was beneficial to himself, but what was beneficial to others.

Throughout chapter 14 Paul repeatedly told the Corinthians that the problem in their church was that they were concerned about themselves and they did not try to build others up.

The church grows when every believer uses his or her spiritual gift to build up the body of Christ.

If you are a Christian, you have a spiritual gift. It was not given to you for your personal pleasure or benefit. It was given to you so that others may be built up.

So, if you are not yet active in building others up, become active today. Every ministry in our church has experienced growth in the last 6 months. Every ministry leader would love to have more people involved in his or her ministry. If you are not yet active in ministry, get involved today! And with the start of an additional Worship Service on April 1, there will be even more members needed for that ministry!

II. The Regulations for Tongues (14:27-28)

Second, let’s look at the regulations for tongues.

Paul now gave some specific regulations for the use of tongues in the church meeting. In fact, there were four regulations for the use of tongues.

A. *Only Two or Three Persons Should Speak in a Tongue (14:27a)*

First, only two or three person should speak in a tongue.

Paul said in verse 27a: “**If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three.**”

This verse uses the singular form for **tongue**. As I mentioned previously, the singular form in chapter 14 usually denotes a false tongue. But, it is clear from this context that Paul intended to convey one person speaking an understandable language that someone else could interpret.

In order to ensure that the meeting did not go on for hours on end, Paul limited the number of speakers to **two or at most three**.

This is not unlike what we might do at a Missions Conference. It is entirely possible that we could have two or three internationals with us who do not speak English and can only communicate to us in their mother tongue.

B. *Each Person Should Speak in Turn (14:27b)*

Second, each person should speak in turn.

Paul said in verse 27b: “. . . **and each in turn.** . . .”

Note that Paul wanted the speakers to speak *sequentially* and not *simultaneously*. People in the congregation needed to hear what was being said.

Dr. John MacArthur says that “one of the strongest indictments of the modern charismatic movement is the common practice of many persons speaking, praying, and singing at the same time, with no one paying attention to what others are doing or saying. It is everyone for himself, just as it was in the Corinth, and is in clear violation of Paul’s command that **each speak in turn.**”²

I have been in meetings where that has taken place, and it is

² John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 386.

cacophonous!

C. The Tongue Must Be Interpreted (14:27c)

Third, the tongue must be interpreted.

Paul said in verse 27c: “. . . **and let someone interpret.**”

This is one of the clearest verses indicating that the tongue that was spoken in the church meeting was to be in an understandable language. Obviously, two people in the church meeting need to be able to understand the tongue being spoken: the speaker and one other person, who can then translate, or interpret, what has been said so that the rest of the body can understand it.

D. If There Is No Interpreter, Then No One Should Speak in a Tongue (14:28)

And fourth, if there is no interpreter, then no one should speak in a tongue.

Paul said in verse 28: “**But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.**”

If no one knew the language of the tongues-speaker, then he could not speak in the church meeting.

Paul’s rule was clear: no interpreter, no tongues-speaker.

III. The Regulations for Prophecy (14:29-31)

Third, let’s look now at the regulations for prophecy.

Paul gave some specific regulations for the use of prophecy in the church meeting. Like tongues, there were four regulations for the use of prophecy.

A. Only Two or Three Prophets Should Speak (14:29a)

First, only two or three prophets should speak.

Paul said in verse 29a: **“Let two or three prophets speak.”**

As I mentioned earlier, the prophets at the time that Paul wrote to the Corinthians spoke for God in two ways. In some instances they gave new revelation from God to the church. In other instances, and this was the more common way for them to prophecy, they proclaimed what had been previously revealed, much like preachers and teachers of God’s Word do today.

Paul was clear that at most **two or three prophets** should **speak** at the church meeting.

B. Others Are To Judge What Is Said (14:29b)

Second, others are to judge what is said.

Paul said in verse 29b: **“. . . and let the others weigh what is said.”**

Bible interpreters seem to differ on who **“the others”** are. Some interpreters say that **the others** are the other prophets, whereas different interpreters say **the others** are the members of the congregation.

I am not sure that we can decide with certainty who **the others** are in this verse. Nevertheless, we can say with certainty that what was said was to be judged. There needed to be a level of spiritual maturity so that **the others** could understand the teaching of God’s Word and judge the prophet/preacher by the Word of God.

C. The Prophet Speaking Must Yield to the One with a Revelation (14:30)

Third, the prophet speaking must yield to the one with a revelation.

Paul said in verse 30: **“If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.”**

According to Paul, a new **revelation** from God took precedence over a reiteration from God. So, if a prophet said that God had revealed something to him that he was to share with the Corin-

thian congregation, then the prophet speaking at the time was to yield the floor to him. The one with the revelation would then deliver the revelation from God.

D. Each Prophet Should Speak in Turn (14:31)

And fourth, each prophet should speak in turn.

Paul said in verse 31: **“For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged.”**

Like those speaking in tongues, no two prophets were to speak simultaneously. They were to speak sequentially, so that everyone in the church meeting could understand what was being said.

IV. The Admonition Regarding Proper Order in the Church Meeting (14:32-33)

Finally, observe the admonition regarding the proper order in the church meeting.

Paul anticipated an objection from the Corinthians. Remember that they believed that they were very spiritual. They thought that their cacophonous ecstatic utterances were gifts from the Holy Spirit. They argued that they could not control themselves because the Spirit came upon them and enabled them to speak gibberish.

And so Paul said in verse 32: **“. . . and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.”** Paul meant that **the spirits of the prophets** was under the control of the **prophets**. In other words, the prophet could control himself. He could control when and how he prophesied.

Paul then explained why that was true. He said in verse 33: **“For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.”** God would not bring **confusion** and disorder and chaos into the church meeting. Rather, a meeting that was under the control of the Spirit of God was marked by **peace**. That is not to say that the church meeting was to be somber and dreary, but rather that **peace** refers to

harmony and order.

Conclusion

Bible commentator Gordon D. Fee says of this passage: “The character of one’s deity is reflected in the character of one’s worship.”³

Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to stop worshiping in a way that reflected pagan deities rather than the true God whom they had come to know in Jesus Christ. The Corinthians were terribly confused about the person and work of God. They thought that the Spirit was empowering their gibberish, but instead it was still a reflection of their pagan worship.

Paul helped them understand who God is and how he works in the church meeting. God is not a God of confusion but a God of peace.

As you and I grow in our worship, we are to grow in our understanding of who God is and how he works in this world and in his church. We are to adjust our thinking and our practice, our faith and our life, in accordance with the Word of God. And the more we do so, the more we will worship God in spirit and in truth. Amen.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 697.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for your Word. We thank you for how you teach us that there must be proper order in the church meeting. You exhort us to build one another up in our most holy faith. You give us regulations for the proper use of tongues and prophecy in the church meeting. And we thank you that you are not a God of confusion but of peace. Help each one of us to grow in our worship of you.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and use the spiritual gifts that God has given you for the common good!