

Worship War

Some churches have fights over...

- Pews or padded chairs in the sanctuary.
- Carpet or wood floors
- Hymns or more contemporary Music
- Get rid of the organ?
- Some people even get upset when the offering is moved from its “normal” place in the service.
- Or even adding a second worship service gets people upset.

The Corinthians were fighting over whose gift was greater & how often they could use it during the worship service!

- Last week we talked about how “Spiritual gifts are for others, not just ourselves.”

What then is the conclusion, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, another language, or an interpretation. **All things must be done for edification.** ²⁷ If any person speaks in another language, there should be only two, or at the most three, each in turn, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no interpreter, that person should keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹ Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should evaluate. ³⁰ But if something has been revealed to another person sitting there, the first prophet should be silent. ³¹ **For you can all prophesy one by one, so that everyone may learn and everyone may be encouraged.** ³² And the prophets' spirits are under the control of the prophets, ³³ since **God is not a God of disorder but of peace.**

As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ the women should be silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak, but should be submissive, as the law also says. ³⁵ And if they want to learn something, they should ask their own husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church meeting. ³⁶ Did the word of God originate from you, or did it come to you only?

³⁷ If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, he should recognize that what I write to you is the Lord's command. ³⁸ But if anyone ignores this, he will be ignored. ³⁹ Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in other languages. ⁴⁰ **But everything must be done decently and in order.** 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Background:

Should women speak in church? V.33-35

- “In the Corinthian culture, women were not allowed to confront men in public. Apparently, some of the women who had become Christians though that their Christian freedom gave them the right to question the men in public worship. This was causing division in the church. In addition, women of that day did not receive formal religious education as did the men. Women may have been raising questions in the worship services that could have been answered at home without disrupting the services. Paul as asking the women not to flaunt their Christian freedom during worship. The purpose of Paul’s words was to promote unity, not to teach about women’s role in the church.” (Life Application)
 - This makes more sense when we realize that in other religions (even Judaism) men & women worshipped in separate parts of the temples. Men over in this courtyard, women in another courtyard or separate balcony.
 - But in Christianity they were all together in the same house church/service. Definitely a new dynamic for many Believers.

Ever been to a sermon where the pastor just kind of rambles on? Preachers who run long over in time will often say “when the Holy Spirit leads, you don’t worry about a clock!”

- That’s kind of a cop-out...

“And the prophets’ spirits are under the control of the prophets,” v. 32

- Rarely are they blessing anyone but their own ego.
 - That’s why I strive to be wrapped up by 10 after as consistently as possible. 😊

There is a consistent theme of INVOLVEMENT in worship from this passage.

When we make worship about us, and not the Lord & others, then chaos will reign.

In worship, we should give, not just receive.

What should we “give”?

- **Give others the benefit of our Spiritual Gifts**

- Paul was laying down some guidelines on how to properly display tongues & prophecy but he clearly wasn't forbidding either & he was encouraging the use of other gifts!
 - *God gave all Believer's a Spiritual Gift to use in the church for the Kingdom!*

What then is the conclusion, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, another language, or an interpretation. V.26

- Dianna Stroer
 - Teaches in Sunday school.
 - Has a heart of Mercy & loves to serve others.
- Penny Stephens
 - Plays the piano
 - Helps keep the Library organized.

- **Give others the benefit of our “Earthly Gifts.”**

- This is a Biblical principal, while not expressly stated in this passage, is consistent throughout the Bible.
 - God gave you skills/abilities (musician, craftsman, etc.), He gave you resources (money, time, etc.) that the Lord expects you to put to good use in for His Kingdom work.
 - Next Sunday, for example, we are going to be changing things up a smidge in our service & have a special story time for the kids in our congregation.
 - Changing things isn't a bad thing. Gets us out of a rut.
☺

- **Give an evaluation of the Sermons you here.**

- Do I mean I should get an e-mailed critique of my message waiting for me at 8 Monday morning?
 - Not necessarily...

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should evaluate. V. 29

- What I DO MEAN is don't take my word for it.

- Study the scriptures for yourself. Get a good Study Bible. Check out some commentaries from the library or see what commentaries I used to be able to go dig in deeper for yourself & see if you agree with my conclusion!
 - *This is a great example of why I think all of you should be involved in a Sunday school class. You can engage so much more deeply than, like right now, for example.*
 - Not just me though...Preachers on TBN or other networks or Radio stations. INVESTIGATE for yourself. Be engaged. Be involved.
 - **Be active in your own spiritual growth.**
 - 1 hour a week simply doesn't cut it.
 - Study your Bible.
 - Spend time in prayer.
 - Then USE your spiritual gifts, the passions, gifts, abilities, that the Lord has given you for His Kingdom work!
- The people of Corinth wanted a "Country Club Church" where they were catered too. Their wants, their "needs" were satisfied.
 - That is NOT the Body of Christ. That is not how church & the Christian life was meant to be lived out.
- Church, worship, isn't about you. It isn't about me. It's about God. It's about others. It's about the BODY of CHRIST.

In worship, we should give, not just receive.

Order (1 Cor. 14:26–40)

Two statements in this section go together: “Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Cor. 14:26), and, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). When a building is constructed, there must be a plan, or everything will be in chaos. I know of a church that had terrible problems building their parsonage, until someone discovered that the lumberyard had a different set of plans from that of the contractor. It was no wonder that the materials shipped to the site did not fit into the building!

The Corinthian church was having special problems with disorders in their public meetings (1 Cor. 11:17–23). The reason is not difficult to determine: they were using their spiritual gifts to please themselves and not to help their brethren. The key word was not *edification*, but *exhibition*. If you think that *your* contribution to the service is more important than your brother’s contribution, then you will either be impatient until he finishes, or you will interrupt him. Add to this problem the difficulties caused by the “liberated women” in the assembly, and you can understand why the church experienced carnal confusion.

First Corinthians 14:26 gives us a cameo picture of worship in the early church. Each member was invited to participate as the Lord directed. One would want to sing a psalm (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Another would be led to share a doctrine. Someone might have a revelation that would be given in a tongue and then interpreted. Apart from some kind of God-given order, there could never be edification.

Note that the tongues speakers were the ones causing the most trouble, so Paul addressed himself to them and gave several instructions for the church to obey in their public meetings.

First, speaking and interpreting, along with judging (evaluating the message) must be done in an orderly manner (1 Cor. 14:27–33). There must not be more than three speakers at any one meeting, and each message must be interpreted and evaluated in order. If no interpreter was present, then the tongues speaker must

keep silent. Paul's admonitions to the Thessalonian congregation would apply here: "Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thes. 5:19–21).

Why were the messages evaluated? To determine whether the speaker had truly communicated the Word of God through the Holy Spirit. It was possible for a speaker, under the control of his own emotions, to imagine that God was speaking to him and through him. It was even possible for Satan to counterfeit a prophetic message (see 2 Cor. 11:13–14). The listeners would test the message, then, by Old Testament Scriptures, apostolic tradition, and the personal guidance of the Spirit ("discerning of spirits," 1 Cor. 12:10).

If while a person is speaking, God gives a revelation to another person, the speaker must be silent while the new revelation is shared. If God is in charge, there can be no *competition* or *contradiction* in the messages. If, however, the various speakers are "manufacturing" their messages, there will be confusion and contradiction.

When the Holy Spirit is in charge, the various ministers will have self-control; for self-control is one fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23). I once shared a Bible conference with a speaker who had "poor terminal facilities." He often went fifteen to twenty minutes past his deadline, which meant, of course, that I had to condense my messages at the last minute. He excused himself to me by saying, "You know, when the Holy Spirit takes over, you can't worry about clocks!" My reply was to quote 1 Corinthians 14:32: "And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets."

Our own self-control is one of the evidences that the Spirit is indeed at work in the meeting. One of the ministries of the Spirit is to bring order out of chaos (Gen. 1). Confusion comes from Satan, not from God (James 3:13–18). When the Spirit is leading, the participants are able to minister "one by one" so that the total impact of God's message may be received by the church.

How do we apply this instruction to the church today since we do not have New Testament prophets, but we do have the completed Scripture? For one thing, we must use the Word of God to test every message that we hear, asking the Spirit to guide us. There are false teachers in the world and we must beware (2 Peter 2; 1 John 4:1–6). But even true teachers and preachers do not know everything and sometimes make mistakes (1 Cor. 13:9, 12; James 3:1). Each listener must evaluate the message and apply it to his own heart.

Our public meetings today are more formal than those of the early church, so it is not likely that we need to worry about the order of the service. But in our more informal meetings, we need to consider one another and maintain order. I recall

being in a testimony meeting where a woman took forty minutes telling a boring experience and, as a result, destroyed the spirit of the meeting.

Evangelist D.L. Moody was leading a service and asked a man to pray. Taking advantage of his opportunity, the man prayed on and on. Sensing that the prayer was killing the meeting instead of blessing it, Moody spoke up and said, “While our brother finishes his prayer, let us sing a hymn!” Those who are in charge of public meetings need to have discernment—and courage.

Second, the women in the meeting were not to speak (1 Cor. 14:34–35). Paul had already permitted the women to pray and prophesy (1 Cor. 11:5), so this instruction must apply to the immediate context of evaluating the prophetic messages. It would appear that the major responsibility for doctrinal purity in the early church rested on the shoulders of the men, the elders in particular (1 Tim. 2:11–12).

The context of this prohibition would indicate that some of the women in the assembly were creating problems by asking questions and perhaps even generating arguments. Paul reminded the married women to be submitted to their husbands and to get their questions answered at home. (We assume that the unmarried women could counsel with the elders or with other men in their own families.) Sad to say, in too many Christian homes today, it is the wife who has to answer the questions for the husband because she is better taught in the Word.

What “law” was Paul referring to in 1 Corinthians 14:34? Probably Genesis 3:16. (The word *law* was a synonym for the Old Testament Scriptures, especially the first five books.) In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul had discussed the relationship of men and women in the church, so there was no need to go into detail.

Third, participants must beware of “new revelations” that go beyond the Word of God (1 Cor. 14:36–40). “To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20). The church had the Old Testament as well as the oral tradition given by the Apostles (2 Tim. 2:2), and this was the standard by which all revelations would be tested. We today have the completed Scriptures as well as the accumulated teachings of centuries of church history to help us discern the truth. The historic evangelical creeds, while not inspired, do embody orthodox theology that can direct us.

In these verses, Paul was answering the church member who might say, “We don’t need Paul’s help! The Spirit speaks to us. We have received new and wonderful revelations from God!” This is a dangerous attitude, because it is the first step toward rejecting God’s Word and accepting counterfeit revelations, including the doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1ff). “The Word did not originate in

your congregation!” Paul replied. “One of the marks of a true prophet is his obedience to apostolic teaching.” In this statement, Paul claimed that what he wrote was actually inspired Scripture, “the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37).

First Corinthians 14:38 does not suggest that Paul wanted people to remain ignorant; otherwise, he would not have written this letter and answered their questions. The *New International Version* translates it, “If he ignores this [Paul’s apostolic authority], he himself will be ignored [by Paul and the churches].” Fellowship is based on the Word, and those who willfully reject the Word automatically break the fellowship (1 John 2:18–19).

Paul summarized the main teachings of 1 Corinthians 14 in verses 39–40. Prophecy is more important than tongues, but the church should not prohibit the correct exercise of the gift of tongues. The purpose of spiritual gifts is the edification of the whole church, and therefore, gifts must be exercised in an orderly manner. Public worship must be carried on “in a seemly manner,” that is, with beauty, order, and spiritual motivation and content.

Before leaving this chapter, it might be helpful to summarize what Paul wrote about the gift of tongues. It is the God-given ability to speak in a known language with which the speaker was not previously acquainted. The purpose was not to win the lost, but to edify the saved. Not every believer had this gift, nor was this gift an evidence of spirituality or the result of a “baptism of the Spirit.”

Only three persons were permitted to speak in tongues in any one meeting, and they had to do so in order and with interpretation. If there was no interpreter, they had to keep silent. Prophecy is the superior gift, but tongues were not to be despised if they were exercised according to Scripture.

When the foundational work of the Apostles and prophets ended, it would seem that the gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and tongues would no longer be needed. “Whether there be tongues, they shall cease” (1 Cor. 13:8). Certainly God could give this gift today if He pleased, but I am not prepared to believe that every instance of tongues is divinely energized. Nor would I go so far as to say that all instances of tongues are either satanic or self-induced.

It is unfortunate when believers make tongues a test of fellowship or spirituality. That in itself would alert me that the Spirit would not be at work. Let’s keep our priorities straight and major on winning the lost and building the church.¹

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 1, pp. 614–616). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

The need for congregational control (14:26–36)

Paul has just referred to occasions when ‘the whole church assembles’ (23). He now deals with what happens on such occasions—or what should happen, because at Corinth there was clearly a tendency towards disorder, if not chaos. Though different from the disorder he has had to rebuke in chapter 11, it is of a similar kind: individuals going ahead with their own personal preferences, instead of thinking of the needs and sensitivities of others.

When, incidentally, he writes of ‘the whole church’ (23) coming together, he is probably thinking of the different home-churches at Corinth meeting together in the large house of one of the few wealthy Christians in the city. Such occasions, which would have been not nearly as frequent as the regular home-church gatherings, were the context in which Paul expected interested inquirers and other ‘outsiders’ to be present. In verse 26, on the other hand, he is probably thinking more of the regular gatherings of believers in different homes throughout the city—what elsewhere he calls ‘the church in the home’ of (for example) Aquila and Prisca. He envisages every member of the church bringing a distinctive contribution to its worshipping life: *a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation* (26). The controlling factor is not personal enjoyment but general edification. Whether in the larger context of the city-wide church or in the microcosm of the home-church, Paul sees the need for control.

a. Control of those with the gift of tongues (27–28). Having made it clear that in the gathered church speaking in tongues must always be accompanied by interpretation, Paul now limits the number of such tongues-plus-interpretation in any one meeting: *let there be only two or at most three*. No doubt that would have sounded like heavy discipline for the Corinthian enthusiasts. Otherwise other important ministry will be squeezed out, and undue emphasis will once again fall on one particular gift—and inevitably on those who have it.

In addition, Paul limits the use of tongues by prohibiting any use of the gift if there is no interpretation forthcoming. In practice this means that, if the first tongue to be brought is not interpreted, others with the gift are to ‘keep silent’. Silence means no noise, and distractingly speaking aloud in tongues to oneself is not obeying the apostolic injunctions in this chapter (*cf.* verse 37). Paul clearly knows (from his own experience?) that the one who speaks in tongues is well able to *speak to himself and to God* in silence, so as not to offend or divert the others. If there is no interpretation, we can safely assume that God intends to minister to the body in some other way.

A fundamental truth is implicit in Paul’s teaching here. Speaking in tongues (and, indeed, prophecy—30) is not an uncontrollable phenomenon. The person with the gift can choose either to use it or not to use it; can choose to use it in private or in public; can choose to keep it private and silent even in public. For this reason it is very misleading to use such language as ‘ecstasy’ (as

in the NEB) to describe any of the Spirit's gifts, but particularly speaking in tongues. Such terminology re-introduces pagan concepts and experiences into the arena of God's operations. His Spirit does not override the wills and minds of human beings. On the contrary, in his love he wins our willing co-operation, and he never forces us to do anything. In all examination of spiritual gifts it is essential to assert this **principle of personal self-control**. Those presiding over the church's worship need to underline the principle consistently.

b. Control of those with the gift of prophecy (29–33). Paul lays down the same limitations for the use of prophecy in any one gathering of the church, presumably for much the same reasons. He reiterates that everyone should expect to be used in this ministry (31), which leads to the whole body being taught and encouraged. This principle hints at another perspective: any member of the body can be used at any meeting to bring any gift. We often allow ourselves to limit the Spirit by expecting certain gifts to come only through certain people, who have been used in that way before.

As far as any prophecy is concerned, it needs always to be weighed, tested, evaluated. When prophecy is rare, we tend to omit this control, and we often pay the penalty in lives being manipulated. In 1 Thessalonians and 1 John³⁵ this weighing is seen to be the responsibility of the whole church. It is tempting to leave it to the leadership. It is also tempting for other prophets to assume the right to weigh such prophecies. **Some of the criteria for such testing are: Does it glorify God? Is it in accord with Scripture? Does it build up the church? Is it spoken in love? Does the speaker submit to judgment by others? Is the speaker in control of himself? Does the speaker go on too long? Is the speaker demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit in his life?**

Again Paul reinforces the fact of self-control (30, 32) in all genuine manifestations of the Spirit. 'A prophet cannot plead, as some in Corinth may have done, that he must continue speaking because the Spirit compels him to do so; if there is a reason for him to be silent, he can be silent.' The apostle then roots this statement in the very character of God himself: *God is not a God of confusion but of peace* (33). When the Spirit is truly in control, he brings peace, not confusion. This is the strongest incentive for pressing on as a congregation to discover and use all the gifts of the Spirit.

c. Control of married women in the congregation (34–36). Whatever this section is teaching, it is not telling women to keep quiet in church. In 11:5, Paul has already referred to women praying and prophesying. The reference to *their husbands at home* (35) immediately indicates that the apostle is thinking about the behaviour of some married women at Corinth, behaviour which needed firm control of the kind which had clearly proved necessary *in all the churches of the saints* (33). Although we cannot uncover the details of what was going on, we can discern some of the attitudes prevalent at Corinth. It seems that the principle of submissiveness was being ignored (*they should be subordinate*, 34), that a spirit of defiance was uppermost (*it is shameful ...*, 35), and that an isolationist tendency was turning these wives into arbitrators of their own church order and even doctrine (*Did the word of God originate with you?*, 36). In other words, these married women were the source of some of the arrogance in the Corinthian church which Paul has already had cause to castigate.

Some commentators think that Paul is checking these women's garrulousness in church gatherings. Something fascinating might have been taught or communicated, and they began to chatter about it as the worship continued. The Greek word translated *speak* (*lalein*) can carry the connotation of chattering, but Paul does not use it this way on other occasions. Barrett's

comments are apt: 'it is not impossible that Paul should now use it in a new sense, but it is unlikely.'³⁹ Whatever the detailed explanation, this paragraph looks like a fairly localized example of what could well have been a general tendency amongst Christian wives in the early church. They had discovered a unique freedom in the life of the Christian community, and it is possible that this freedom had gone to their heads, or, more precisely, to their tongues. **This lack of self-discipline was causing confusion and disorder in the worship of the church.** Because Paul is so insistent on the priority of edification, he writes with some firmness—and not a little sarcasm—about the need for control.

5. Conclusion (14:37–40)

Paul ends the general discussion on spirituality (chapters 12–14) and the specific teaching on prophecy (chapter 14) with a strongly-worded statement about his authority as an apostle: *what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord*. Obviously there were many Christians at Corinth laying claim to being really spiritual: Paul's response to such claims points out that true spirituality is not arrogant and self-assertive, but accepts the authority of those set over them in the Lord. To those Corinthians who prided themselves on being prophets—an attitude which often seems to characterize those used in the prophetic ministry—Paul also emphasizes the call to recognize the authority behind his remarks. Any tendency to think that we are right, while the rest of the church universal is wrong, is both arrogant and dangerous.

Yet, whatever the dangers and the temptations facing those with the gift of prophecy, Paul concludes with another exhortation to the Corinthians to pursue it with eagerness. It seems that he may have been worried lest he had so played down speaking with tongues in public, that the leadership would start to clamp down on it completely. So he urges them not to hamper, hinder, prevent or restrain speaking in tongues: any of these words is a more accurate translation of the Greek (*kōlyō*) than RSV's *forbid* (39). This is another instruction, with the Lord's specific command behind it (37), which the church today needs to obey.

His final word on the matter is directly connected with the number one priority of edification: *all things should be done decently and in order* (40). **The first word focuses on the way Christian worship appears to onlookers, the second on the ability of each individual Christian to function properly in his or her own place. As the latter is encouraged in an atmosphere of true love, so the net result will be a community life which attracts outsiders by its harmony and beauty.**

Additional note on spiritual gifts

Some scholars and commentators believe that certain gifts of the Spirit are not generally available to the church in every generation. They rightly stress the uniqueness and unrepeatable authority of apostles and prophets in founding the church, and conclude that since those times there have been no apostles nor prophets of comparable authority. Miracles and healings, it is further argued, tended to cluster round specific periods of divine revelation (*e.g.* the Exodus, the giving of the law, the days of Elijah and Elisha, the ministry of Jesus and his apostles) and were intended to authenticate it. They should, therefore, not be expected today with the same frequency. Some writers also include speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues as New

Testament phenomena which are not in evidence today, and regard 'the utterance of wisdom' and 'the utterance of knowledge' as non-miraculous words of wisdom and knowledge.

Some writers go further still and categorically declare that no miracles of any kind have taken place since the apostolic age. In this case, the majority of the nine specific gifts in 12:8–10 are either consigned to the past history of the church or explained as 'sanctified common sense'. Classic Pentecostalism, either in reaction or in re discovery, has stressed the supernatural nature of all these nine gifts, to the exclusion (generally speaking) of any ordinary manifestation of such gifts of God's grace in everyday Christian living.

This exposition of chapters 12 and 14 has sought to avoid both extremes. The basis of this approach is not a desire for compromise, so much as the essential conviction that God is both transcendent and immanent. Because he transcends this world, the church, our minds and our experience, we can expect him to manifest himself in ways consistent with his own revealed nature, however unpredictable in terms of our own finite limitations. Because he also holds the world and the church together and 'upholds the universe by his word of power', we shall find him constantly at work redeeming and renewing all the resources inherent in us because we have been created in his image.

We find it unhelpful, therefore, to introduce into this discussion of spiritual gifts any notions of 'natural' and 'supernatural', 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'usual' and 'unusual'. This terminology is not used by Paul or any biblical writer; it seems illegitimate therefore to import it into the text as an aid to exegesis, especially in any determinative fashion.

Because there is no *biblical* warrant for the total cessation of certain gifts (with the exception of the unique ministries exercised by the original apostles and prophets), we feel it right to focus our attention on the ascended Lord Jesus Christ, who remains the same today as ever, and who longs to see his church grow into maturity in both the fruit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Implicit in that focus is the expectation that there is always more to know and to share. In both tenor and thrust, the relevant biblical passages (including 1 Corinthians 12–14) open up our horizons, increase our expectancy and broaden our vision of all that God by his Spirit wants to do in the body of Christ.

This uncertainty about what God might do with us as his church need not move us, in the face of spiritual phenomena of various kinds, either into childish gullibility or into sceptical rationalism. It does almighty God no service to be constantly spotlighting what some regard as exceptional and extraordinary. Nor is it honouring to him to preclude any manifestation of his power and glory which we find it hard to explain or control. The Corinthians wrongly concentrated on what they reckoned to be the more dramatic gifts—and Paul found them in disorder, heresy, immorality and division. Let us not, in reaction, adopt an understanding of spiritual gifts which effectively excludes a God who transcends our finite minds, and who in his love reveals himself unexpectedly in our mortal existence. We believe that a supreme miracle happens in conversion and regeneration: why not thereafter?²

² Prior, D. (1985). [*The message of 1 Corinthians: life in the local church*](#) (pp. 249–255). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

IF INTELLIGIBILITY IS A PRIORITY for the gathered community, how then should worship proceed? Verses 26–40 answer this question and subdivide into three parts: a description of orderly spontaneity in verses 26–33a, the silence of women during the evaluation of prophecy in verses 33b–38, and a concluding summary in verses 39–40. Verse 26 insists that the Corinthians continue to worship in highly participatory and spontaneous fashion: “Everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.” This does not mean that every person present exercises all of the gifts, nor even that all exercise at least one in every service. But opportunity is made available for all whom the Spirit leads on any given occasion to contribute.

This list gives sample contributions; other standard elements of early Christian worship are itemized in Acts 2:42–47: apostolic instruction, fellowship, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, miracles, sharing of finances, praising God, and evangelism. Yet once again Paul stresses the need for everything to be done so as to build up fellow believers. It is just possible that the shift in focus from evangelizing non-Christians in verses 22–25 to edifying believers in verse 26, together with the more informal and highly participatory model of verse 26, indicates that this is the pattern for the regular small home-fellowship gatherings, whereas the earlier verses reflect periodic larger, more public assemblies of multiple house-churches.

Verses 27–32 again narrow the focus to the two key gifts of tongues and prophecy. In closely parallel fashion, verses 27–28 and 29–32 temper the spontaneity described in verse 26 by regulating the exercise of these two particular gifts. No more than two or three may speak in tongues in any given service (or, less likely, before someone interprets), they must do so sequentially not simultaneously, and there must be an interpretation (vv. 27–28). If this is not possible, then the would-be tongues-speaker should remain silent or say his or her prayer inaudibly to God.

Verses 29–32 regulate prophecy in similar fashion, lest it too be abused, however inherently more valuable it may be. Again only two or three should speak, one at a time, and their messages should be evaluated. This last constraint probably applies to the interpretations of tongues as well, since tongues plus interpretation closely resembles prophecy in function.

The “others” of verse 29 are more naturally taken to refer to the rest of the congregation, not merely the other prophets. If “weigh carefully” meant exercising the gift of discernment (12:10), then there would be clearly no guarantee that those who had the gift of prophecy necessarily had the gift of discernment too. But even if, as we have suggested, exercising the gift of discernment is not what Paul means by carefully weighing prophecy, it is still unlikely that the prophets were the best persons to evaluate each others’ messages. Certainly, when prophecy is taken to include Spirit-filled preaching, it seems clear that the ordinary “layperson” is often in a better position to determine how well or accurately the preacher has communicated than are fellow-preachers, who are absorbed in the fine points of the theology or technique of the message.

Verse 30 parallels verse 27 in insisting that prophets, like tongues-speakers, exercise their gifts in turn. Verse 31 parallels verse 5 in illustrating Paul's desire that all might exercise these gifts, without implying that all can or will. Paul merely leaves the door open for the Spirit to empower whomever he chooses on any given occasion. Verse 32 proves that Christian prophecy (and presumably also tongues and their interpretation) is not "ecstatic" in the technical sense of that term. In other words, believers in the process of exercising their spiritual gifts are never so "out of control" as to be unable to stop or regulate their behavior. Verse 33a concludes the unit of thought begun in verse 26 by giving the rationale for the regulations of tongues and prophecy just stipulated: orderliness and peace.

Verses 34–35 seem quite intrusive at this juncture. Why does Paul seemingly interrupt his discussion of these two spiritual gifts in order to silence women? In verses 37 and 39–40, he is clearly still addressing the topic of tongues and prophecy. A few late manuscripts, probably for this very reason, place verses 34–35 after verse 40 instead. At least in that position, they could appear as the beginning of a brand new discussion. A popular view in more liberal circles today is that Paul did not write these words; rather, they were added later by some scribe who was far more conservative than Paul himself. But there is not one existing manuscript in which these verses are lacking, and the textual relocation that occurred in a few manuscripts is readily explainable along the lines noted above, without resorting to the conjecture that verses 34–35 were not what Paul originally wrote.

Another popular recent proposal is that these two verses represent another Corinthian slogan which Paul quotes only to refute in verses 36–38. This view too proves highly implausible, for no fewer than seven reasons: Unlike all the other widely acknowledged slogans in 1 Corinthians, these verses (1) are not concise or proverbial in form; (2) do not reflect the libertine wing of the church; (3) require the assumption that there was a significant Judaizing element in the church, which little else in the letter supports; (4) are not qualified by Paul but rejected outright; and (5) as best as we can tell represent an explanation that was never proposed in the history of the church until the twentieth century. In addition, (6) this view requires taking the Greek conjunction *e* ("or," left untranslated in the NIV) at the beginning of verse 36 as a complete repudiation of what has gone before, even though no other use of *e* in Paul functions in that way. Finally, (7) it assumes that "the only people" in verse 36, a masculine plural adjective (*monous*), refers just to men rather than to both men and women, even though no other plural reference to the Corinthians ever singles out the men in this way without explicitly saying so.

Equally implausible is the older, extremely conservative perspective that verses 34–35 are absolute commands silencing women in every way during the Corinthian worship service. This view has to assume that 11:5 was in fact not implying Paul's approval of women praying or prophesying publicly, but surely if that were the case he would have had to say so. Or else one has to assume, without any contextual support, that two different kinds of Christian assemblies are in view in the two passages. Or, if one has an extremely low view of Paul, not only as uninspired but also as unable to remember what he has recently written, one can simply admit a contradiction. But these approaches surely reflect last-ditch resorts to support a highly chauvinistic interpretation of 14:34–35.

Another cluster of interpretations seems more probable, though none is without its problems. Factors of cultural background may have explained Paul's commands. Perhaps the

largely uneducated women of that day were interrupting proceedings with irrelevant questions that would be better dealt with in their homes. This would explain the language of verse 35. Perhaps they were “chattering,” or even gossiping, as some Jewish women sitting in their segregated synagogue balconies reputedly liked to do. Or perhaps they were caught up in subtly promoting false teaching. But while historically and contextually plausible, each of these views fails to explain why Paul silenced *all* women and *no* men, when presumably there were at least a few well-educated, courteous, or orthodox women and at least a few uneducated, less than polite, or doctrinally aberrant men!

Still others think Paul is excluding women from speaking not in general but in tongues. This perspective has the advantage of recognizing that the verb “speak” in verse 34 is regularly used throughout this chapter for charismatic speech. But if tongues is a spiritual gift, then surely the Spirit gives it to whomever he chooses irrespective of gender (cf. 12:11; 11:15).

Perhaps the best perspective, therefore, is to take Paul’s commands as prohibiting women from participating in the final church decisions about the legitimacy of any given prophecy. To begin with, “speak,” in twenty of the twenty-one appearances of this verb in this chapter outside of vv 34–35, refers either directly or by analogy to one of four very particular kinds of speech: tongues, their interpretation, prophecy or its evaluation. But the first three of these are spiritual gifts, distributed regardless of gender. An authoritative evaluation of prophecy, however, while requiring input from the whole congregation, would ultimately have been the responsibility of the church leadership (what Paul elsewhere calls elders or overseers), who, at least in the first century, seem to have been exclusively male. This interpretation also explains why these verses come where they do. The sequence of topics from verses 27–33 has been precisely: tongues, their interpretation, prophecy, and its evaluation, in that order. The obvious drawback of this approach is that it must infer a meaning for “speaking” which Paul never spells out. But that problem afflicts all of the views that take Paul’s words as less than absolute at this point, and this view seems to have the least number of additional difficulties.

What then do we do with verse 33b? It is awkward whether we take it as concluding the sentence begun in verse 33a or as introducing verses 34–35. The NIV’s approach seems slightly more probable. “It is difficult to think that such a far-reaching principle” as that of God’s orderliness “should be qualified as no more than the custom of the churches.” The awkward repetition created by taking it with verse 34 (literally, “as in all the churches of the saints, let the women in the churches be silent”) can be plausibly explained by understanding Paul to be moving from the non-Corinthian congregations to the different Corinthian house-churches. They seemingly think they have a corner on the truth with respect to a practice that no one else has adopted (v. 36), so Paul reminds them that what is done everywhere else should be observed in *their* assemblies as well.

As in 11:2–16, the women whom Paul silences may be only wives. This would explain why they must not publicly challenge the church’s prophecies but consult “their own men” at home (v. 35, surely a reference to husbands, as in the NIV). To do otherwise might be to challenge their husbands in church in ways that would contradict their God-ordained submission to them (v. 34). The “Law” cannot refer to a specific Old Testament passage telling women to be silent in public worship, since no such passage exists. Neither does it likely refer to Genesis 3:16, since Paul does not elsewhere cite the results of the Fall as a rationale for desirable *Christian*

behavior. Rather he probably alludes to the order and purpose of creation in Genesis 2, just as he did in 11:8–9 with respect to women’s honoring their heads.

Verses 36–38 thus challenge the Corinthians not to reject Paul’s counsel lightly. If every other Christian church practiced what Paul preached on this matter, who are they to be the sole exceptions (v. 36)? Those who contested Paul’s teaching undoubtedly justified their rebellion by claiming the Spirit’s direction (v. 37a). So Paul adds that if they are truly Spirit-led they will come to acknowledge his views as from the Lord (v. 37b). If they continue to go their own way, they demonstrate that they are out of touch with the Spirit, and the Lord will continue to ignore them and to accomplish his work without them (v. 38). (The NIV footnote [“If he is ignorant of this, let him be ignorant”] reflects a less well-attested textual variant that was probably trying to smooth out the text.)

Finally, verses 39–40 bring all three chapters (12–14), but especially this last one, to a fitting conclusion, as they balance Paul’s twin concerns for freedom and structure. Every gift has its place, but each must be used to build up the church in unity and love.³

Bridging Context

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN most contemporary church services and the picture of Corinthian worship in verse 26 makes application of this verse difficult. The vexed question of why Paul silences women in verses 34–35 should make our applications tentative there. Nevertheless, there are numerous important principles that emerge from the passage as a whole that have cross-cultural value.

Verses 26–33a illustrate key facets of Christian worship. As in chapter 12, Paul strongly encourages every member’s participation or use of his or her gifts. Little wonder that the church historically has usually grown the fastest, and evangelism has proved the most effective, in small, informal fellowships. These may be fledgling “church plants,” or small groups within larger, more established congregations. Even the exceptions to this trend, as with mass response to large crusades, tend not to bear lasting fruit unless newly converted individuals are linked up with local congregations for ongoing nurture and discipleship.¹⁵ Crucial to that nurture is involving new believers in the exercise of their gifts. As the “headline” to this half-chapter, verse 26 reminds us that Paul’s principles for prophecy and tongues in verses 27–38 apply to all the gifts. And preeminent among them is the principle that God gives gifts to prepare *all* church members to contribute to the growth of the body (v. 12).

Verses 27–33a balance verse 26 by stressing the need for order in worship. The fact that Paul never mentions church leaders does not mean they are not present. Acts 14:23 describes Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in all the churches they evangelized. Our reconstruction of the role of patrons in Corinth suggests that the church had powerful leaders indeed (see Introduction, p. 20). Although Christianity, like new religious groups in general, experienced a

³ Blomberg, C. (1994). [1 Corinthians](#) (pp. 277–282). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

growing institutionalization over its first few centuries, the evidence suggests that there was a built-in structure from the beginning. The discussion of the offices of overseer and deacon, with the criteria for selecting people to hold these offices (1 Tim. 3:1–13; Tit. 1:6–9), cannot be relegated merely to a late, post-Pauline date, on the presupposition that Paul did not write the Pastoral Letters. After all, Paul’s indisputably authentic letter to the Philippians begins with a greeting to precisely these two categories of church officials (Phil. 1:1), no later than A.D. 62, only seven years after the writing of 1 Corinthians.

Verse 27 combines with verse 13 to show us two ways in which interpretation of tongues can take place. If certain believers know they have the latter gift, they can proceed to speak in tongues with greater confidence, trusting that they will subsequently be able to provide the interpretation. It is interesting that verse 13 introduces a paragraph on glossolalia, in which tongues function not to communicate a message to God’s people, but to pray and give praise to God. Perhaps in such a situation it is more natural to expect the tongues-speaker to be able to interpret his or her own message. That way, such people could speak in tongues privately as well, while still understanding the meaning of what they are saying. Verse 28, on the other hand, acknowledges the truth of 12:30, that not all tongues-speakers will necessarily be able to interpret. If such people find themselves in Christian assemblies where they do not know if anyone else has the gift of interpretation, they should proceed more cautiously.

It is probably appropriate, in settings in which glossolalia has never before been experienced, for persons who believe God is leading them to speak in tongues to “float a trial balloon” and go ahead and speak at a timely moment that does not interrupt someone else. They might want to proceed cautiously, however, unless they sense some openness to tongues in that particular assembly. But if no interpretation is forthcoming, they should refrain from continuing to speak in tongues in that congregation until they have reason to believe an interpreter is present. This might occur, for example, when another member of the church admits to feeling that he or she understood the message but was simply too fearful or shy to speak up.

Given our interpretation of verses 5a and 31, we must continue to insist that believers never try to make any one gift a criterion of any kind of spirituality. It is illegitimate to insist that all Christians prophesy or speak in tongues, or experience any other particular spiritual gift. These verses do show, however, that all believers can potentially receive any specific gift, including these two. So it remains appropriate for us to pray for a gift that we earnestly feel would benefit the church, but we may never claim that God has to give it to us.

These verses almost certainly imply as well that Paul anticipates the Spirit’s sovereign distribution of his gifts irrespective of gender, as in 12:11. Nor is there any need to try to distinguish between these verses and 12:29 by arguing that all believers may occasionally prophesy or speak in tongues, whereas only some do so often enough for others to consider that they are actually gifted in these areas. There is no indication in Scripture that giftedness is based on frequency of use. It is true that the same terminology can in some cases be used to refer to both gifts and offices (teaching/teacher, pastoring/pastor, and perhaps prophecy/prophet), but there is no hint in 1 Corinthians 12–14 that Paul has any offices in view.

Verses 27–32 also refute all claims to “ecstasy” in the practice of tongues, interpretation, and prophecy. If a person is genuinely “out of control” in the exercise of such behavior, he or she is not being controlled by the Holy Spirit! These verses also demonstrate that even the

more supernatural gifts do not carry the same authority as Scripture, since it is conceivable that a particular revelation might never get spoken if the guidelines Paul lays down are carefully followed. “Truth is not arrived at by quantity.” What is more, believers dare not assume that even genuine tongues or prophecy is necessarily communicated or interpreted inerrantly, otherwise there would be no reason for the congregation to “weigh carefully what is said” (v. 29).

A good example of this problem appears in Acts 21:4. There Luke describes how Christians in Tyre urged Paul “through the Spirit” (the identical expression used for Agabus’ prophetic speech in Acts 11:28) not to go on to Jerusalem. In 21:11, Agabus himself arrives in Caesarea and declares in the name of the Spirit how Paul will be imprisoned if he goes ahead with his travel plans. But he remains unpersuaded, and when he decides to continue on his journey anyway, Paul’s fellow Christians reply, “The Lord’s will be done.” Someone has misunderstood the Lord’s will, and it doesn’t seem likely that it was Paul! More probably, the Christians in Tyre had received the same message as Agabus did but mistakenly interpreted the prediction of Paul’s fate as a command to him not to go on. But they presented their word from the Lord as if the Spirit himself had told Paul not to continue. Clearly, Christians must have the freedom to test and reject what other believers tell them God has privately revealed, if it does not match up to the ways they believe God is personally guiding them.

What criteria can be deduced, then, for evaluating Christian prophecy? Michael Green gives seven suggestions: (1) Does it glorify God rather than the speaker, church, or denomination? (2) Does it accord with Scripture? (3) Does it build up the church? (4) Is it spoken in love? (5) Does the speaker submit him- or herself to the judgment and consensus of others in spiritual humility? (6) Is the speaker in control of him- or herself? (7) Is there a reasonable amount of instruction, or does the message seem excessive in detail? Even after using criteria such as these, there will often remain ambiguities, further reinforcing our conviction that such messages cannot be trusted perfectly. But where several of these principles are clearly violated, the church should lovingly but firmly insist that the speaker stop claiming gifts of inspired utterance, or at the very least work with a mentor in smaller, less public settings to cultivate his or her gifts so as to be able to use them more accurately or appropriately.

A valid application of verses 34–35 obviously depends on the option adopted as to the original meaning of these verses. If Paul did not write them or if they reflect a Corinthian slogan that he refutes, then clearly we can ignore the commands that they contain and even work to combat a similar mentality in contemporary Christianity. But if they do reflect Paul’s perspective, as seems highly likely, then we ignore them at our own peril (vv. 36–38). That still would not necessarily mean that they remain normative today, at least not in every detail. If one of the cultural explanations for Paul’s silencing the women is accepted, then contemporary Christians will silence women in church only where comparable problems—lack of education, interfering chatter, or the promotion of false teaching—still exist. And they will impose silence on men who fall victim to one of these problems as well.

If the evaluation of prophecy is in view, several more options come into play. For interpreters who limit prophecy to its more spontaneous manifestations, the application of verses 34–35 will be limited to more charismatic congregations, where such manifestations occur. Those who adopt a broader understanding of prophecy will raise again the question of women in the highest levels of Christian leadership. If the elder/overseer was the office that

was uniquely responsible for teaching and exercising authority over the congregation (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17), then perhaps Paul is precluding women from holding this (and only this) office. This interpretation, incidentally, stands a good chance of explaining the combination of verbs (“teach” and “exercise authority”) in 1 Timothy 2:12. There Paul is referring to the office of overseer, which he immediately elucidates in the opening verses of chapter 3. But if “women” is better interpreted as “wives,” then these restrictions would not bar single women from the eldership, nor husbands and wives from positions of joint leadership, nor wives from offices of oversight in churches in which their husbands are not members (though the last of these arrangements is less than desirable on other grounds).²² And, as noted in discussing 11:2–16, our understanding of sensitive topics such as women in ministry will ultimately have to be governed by our synthesis of all the biblical material relevant to the issue.

Interestingly, Paul gives the same threefold rationale for his commands in verses 33b–35 as he did for honoring one’s head in 11:2–16. These include cultural disgrace (v. 35), the universal practice of the churches in Paul’s day (v. 33b), and an appeal to creation order (v. 34). As in chapter 11, the specific injunction is supported by situation-specific arguments, while the broader principle of submission is supported by an appeal to a timeless mandate. So married women in other times and places should feel free to participate even in the evaluation of prophecy, and even beyond the general level already implied in verse 29, **so long as they do not do so from the vantage point of an office of leadership that jeopardizes their God-ordained deference to their husbands.**

Verses 39–40 round out Paul’s discussion with remarkably balanced conclusions. We dare not rule out any of the spiritual gifts as limited to some previous age or as a sign of the immaturity of particular believers or congregations. But we dare not make any gift, especially tongues and prophecy, a criterion of anything. **Unity and mutual edification always remain the overriding goals.** Everything must be done decently and in order. But Paul’s last word here does not endorse a dead formalism. Decorum itself is highly culture-specific. The thrust of chapter 14 still highlights spontaneity and freedom. **Church should be a place that exudes joy and life, but never to such a degree that outsiders are repelled or insiders alienated from each other.**⁴

Contemporary Significance

SIGNIFICANT SECTORS OF the Christian world continue to insist that all who really want to be at the center of God’s activity must experience one or another of the seemingly more supernatural gifts, an insistence that flatly contradicts Paul’s theology in this half-chapter. In other cases, churches stop short of this demand but continue to violate, week in and week out, Paul’s rules for regulating tongues and prophecy. Repeatedly, alleged words of the Lord are never tested or

⁴ Blomberg, C. (1994). *1 Corinthians* (pp. 283–287). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

challenged; indeed no mechanism is in place for doing so. Far more than two or three individuals speak in tongues at any given service. People are taught to pray, or have had hands laid on them while they are told to pray, in order to claim by faith that they will receive a certain gift, even though Paul makes it clear they can have no assurance that God will choose to grant that particular gift.

More subtly, some churches have a regular period of time in which large numbers of people simultaneously pray out loud in tongues, justifying this practice as the mass exercise of a private prayer language. But unbelievers can have the identical reaction to this behavior as to regular tongues (recall verse 23), so this theological sleight of hand seems indefensible. When Paul says “two or three,” and “one at a time” (v. 27), he means precisely that. And private prayer language is for personal, private edification. “The building up of the community is the basic reason for corporate settings of worship. They should probably not be turned into a corporate gathering for a thousand individual experiences of worship.”

The noncharismatic church, on the other hand, has a large number of lessons to learn from verse 26. If gifts are given to every believer for the corporate edification of the gathered community, then there must be opportunities for church members to exercise those gifts in public worship. One of the few modern churches to capture this emphasis has been the Plymouth Brethren, but even their “spontaneous” sharing can become quite predictable.

If Paul were writing the average congregation today, his advice would have to work the other side of the street. Rather than an unstructured spontaneity that creates bedlam, he would be confronted with a well-regulated order of worship that often creates boredom. The smallest of churches often prints or mimeographs for its members a program of everything that is going to happen during the hour and the sequence in which it will take place, and once it has been printed it becomes a sacred thing to those who planned it. And the likelihood of the Spirit’s leading anyone to say or do something that was not anticipated on Tuesday when the stencil was cut is very remote.

Orders of service are not necessarily bad, but if they are to be used there must be consistent, built-in opportunities for congregants to share more spontaneously how the Lord has been guiding them to contribute to worship. Some churches do this effectively by including a time for anyone to request or lead in a hymn, share a brief message, offer a prayer, share an answer to prayer, and so on. If Sunday morning worship services are too large for most people to feel comfortable entering into this process, other settings must be found where they can—for example, in Sunday School, during other worship services, or in small groups meeting in members’ homes. Even more significant may be the resurgence of the house-church movement, both in charismatic and increasingly in noncharismatic circles as well. Where there are several like-minded house-churches in reasonably close geographical proximity, they may choose to unite periodically for larger group worship and instruction and enjoy together the resources to which none of them has access on its own.

Verses 27–33 remind us, at the same time, that however creative or flexible the structure of worship may be, duly recognized leaders must have the authority to intervene and correct when Scripture is contradicted or disobeyed. When someone speaks out loud in a tongue, if no one proceeds to give an interpretation, the worship leader should call for one. If one still does not emerge, the leader should request that no further tongues be manifested at that particular

service. This in fact is the procedure that many churches do follow today, though at times uninterpreted tongues are tolerated without response.

In other instances, if no one answers the call for an interpretation, the worship leader himself or herself often supplies one. In such instances, it is hard not to suspect that the “interpretation” is fabricated. If God had given the interpretation to that individual in the first place, he or she should have spoken it at once. Giving it after no one else is willing to do so unfortunately looks more like a “face-saving” device.

A somewhat daring but certainly reliable way to test the authenticity of the practice of interpreting tongues in a given context is for a speaker who knows a *bona fide* foreign language that no one else in the congregation knows to speak a brief message in that language. If an interpretation follows that bears no relationship to the meaning of the words, as has at times happened when such a test has been conducted, we can be sure it is not the Spirit supplying the “interpretation.”

Comparing verses 1–33a with contemporary Christian practice suggests two sweeping generalizations to which there are many exceptions. First, large segments of charismatic Christianity so dwell on alleged words of the Lord, under various labels, that are so trite, repetitive, and predictable in nature that one cannot help but suspect that most of them come from human manufacture. God is not in the business of using miraculous means consistently to call attention to the obvious or ordinary. Probably a few people in each of these circles experienced the genuine gift, others wanted or were encouraged to get on the “bandwagon,” and so they have imitated the genuine gifts in their own strength. Second, large segments of noncharismatic Christianity are so enslaved to traditional patterns of worship that the Spirit could not break through without substantial disruption. A considerable majority of the church members are convinced that their gifts don’t count. Not surprisingly, they remain relatively uninvolved. Both groups typically recreate worship after the models of their immediate spiritual predecessors rather than genuinely seeking to overhaul their worship and bring it into conformity with 1 Corinthians 14.

When we turn to verses 33b–38, we enter another maze of competing applications. Not surprisingly, many egalitarians quickly jump to endorse one or the other of the two least probable interpretations—that verses 34–35 are an interpolation or a Corinthian slogan. Equally predictably, some hierarchicalists continue to try to defend an absolutist interpretation of these verses, notwithstanding 11:5, and they too throw aside exegetical common sense in the process. One can maintain greater credibility, and still be either egalitarian or hierarchical, by supporting one of the other positions surveyed earlier (see pp. 280–82). If Paul is responding to a lack of education or a problem with chattering or false teaching, then one must look for contemporary analogies. Where believers remain so uneducated that their questions would overly distract from the proceedings of a service or time of instruction, they must be given extra teaching privately. Many churches effectively meet this need with special classes for prospective or new members and with “graded” curricula for adults who need to be taught the basics of the faith before entering into more advanced discussions. Some congregations unfortunately tolerate adults and teenagers incessantly talking during the worship service, or coming and going at will, in ways that hinder those around them from entering into or remaining fully concentrated on actual worship. Words from the pulpit to discourage such behavior can prove very helpful.

If the issue in verses 34–35 is the evaluation of prophecy by an all male eldership at Corinth, then we must ask what are the functional equivalents to elders today? That office is usually most closely approximated, at least in congregationally run churches, by the senior pastor, except in those rare instances in which a body of elders is made up of individuals who are genuinely equal in responsibility for teaching and directing the affairs of the congregation. In presbyterian or episcopalian forms of church government, even senior pastors submit to larger structures of authorities over them, so presumably women's subordination could be preserved even with a female senior pastor at the congregational level. And women's contributions to the leadership of the church in general, and to the evaluation of reputed messages from God in particular, dare not be stifled in ways that prevent them from a full exercise of their spiritual gifts.

Men and women alike need to evaluate with greater consistency and acumen the messages their leaders proclaim to them week in and week out. Ours is the age of professional Christian leadership. Sermons are swallowed by a gullible laity even though they promote rank heresy in many liberal churches, racism and other forms of discrimination in many conservative churches, and less serious mistakes and banalities in both contexts. Better are the models in which Sunday-morning messages are discussed in question and answer or dialogical format on Sunday evenings (or at some other time), or in which pastors consult with a group of trained laity before and/or after sermons to aid in preparation and debriefing.

Equally troubling is the phenomenon of church members trusting some itinerant Christian celebrity over their own local pastors. It is good occasionally to invite guest speakers to a church to bring a fresh perspective and energy, but many churches rely on outsiders to bring a level of expertise that they should be cultivating among their own members. A seminary professor, for example, can offer a breadth of biblical and theological learning to which few in any local congregation have had access, but with the wealth of commentaries and other Bible study tools available in the Western world today, we ought to be encouraging all church members to use these resources on a regular basis.

Verses 36–38 call into question the continued attachment to denominational distinctions that prevent the contemporary evangelical church from achieving powerful, visible unity. If only one small branch of contemporary Christianity holds to a particular doctrine or practice, it is probably not clearly mandated in Scripture and therefore not important enough to divide believers. The main exception to this principle lies in matters of racism, sexism, ageism, and the like, precisely because the groups that are discriminated against are by definition minorities! But the broad-based consensus on the fundamentals of the faith achieved by many organizations in the parachurch movement needs to be imitated by church folk too. Then views on baptism, church polity, eschatology, and so on would no longer hinder churches from working in cooperative ventures for the promotion of kingdom priorities. And surely views on women's roles come under this category.

We desperately need to allow one another the freedom to agree to disagree, to set up alternate models, to encourage local fellowships to determine for themselves, according to their best understanding of Scripture, what men and women should and should not do in home and in church. Egalitarians and hierarchicalists alike need to stop accusing each other of being unbiblical and instead acknowledge more humbly that the biblical data simply aren't clear enough to permit dogmatism on either side.

The same is also most certainly true for charismatics and noncharismatics. Verses 39–40 end with strikingly plain words that are nevertheless disobeyed by large sections of the contemporary church. Many noncharismatics flatly forbid tongues, while many charismatics seldom come close to worshiping decently and in order. As Fee comments,

It is of some interest that people who believe so strongly in the Bible as the Word of God should at the same time spend so much energy getting around the plain sense of verses 39–40. Surely there is irony in that. What Paul writes in these chapters he claims to be the command of the Lord; one wonders how he might have applied verse 38 to those who completely reject this command.

On the other hand, if a majority of Christians obeyed Paul's commands, most of the divisiveness of the charismatic phenomena could be prevented and Paul's dominant concern for the mutual strengthening of believers enhanced. In some circles, the best illustration of the balance Paul commands appears in the charismatic renewal movement within liturgical churches. But where they may achieve an exemplary combination of structure and freedom, other problems sometimes intrude, not least of which is the danger of authoritarian charismatic leaders compounding their heavy-handedness with the weight of an elaborate denominational hierarchy above them. A combination of true congregational governance, with a balance between spontaneity and structure in worship, would seem to reflect Paul's ideal. But such churches remain few and far between.⁵

⁵ Blomberg, C. (1994). [1 Corinthians](#) (pp. 287–292). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.