



Order and Authority

1 Corinthians 14:20-40

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I want to continue this morning with the second half of 1 Corinthians 14, beginning at verse 20. St. Paul's still dealing with worship here and with the ways in which the Corinthian church was misusing some of their spiritual gifts when they came together, but in these verses Paul looks at the problems from the standpoint of *order* and *authority*. Look with me at 1 Corinthians 14:20.

Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.

Now that's a strong warning and condemnation, but this whole passage is like that. (Just wait until we get to the end!) He addresses them as his brothers – brothers in Christ – and in that he softens the blow, but remember to whom he's writing. We saw earlier that these were people who thought that they'd arrived spiritually – even to the point of rejecting the Apostle Paul's authority because they saw him as lacking their super-spirituality. He addressed their party label at the beginning of Chapter 12. They were the "Spirituals" or the "Spiritual People" and everyone else was below them, lacking what they had and therefore spiritually inferior.

And Paul says to these people who thought they were mature, "You're thinking like children. Stop it! Yes, be like babies – be innocent – when it comes to evil, but when it comes to your thinking about the Christian life, engage your God-given intellect and stop thinking like babies!" He strikes them on two fronts. What's characteristic of a baby's thinking? Well, first, they can't reason things out. Their thought processes haven't developed that far yet, which is why it's so frustrating to see a mother trying to reason with her misbehaving baby. It's not going to work. But the other thing about babies is that they're supremely selfish. The universe revolves around a baby – at least as far as he's

concerned. And that's in part because of our sin-nature, but also because a baby can't conceive yet of other people having needs and desires – again, their thought processes aren't that developed.

We've already seen how these so-called "Spiritual People" were being selfish in their use of gifts – using them to build up themselves instead of working to build up the Church, but now Paul shows how they just weren't thinking things through. He walks them through this using a passage from Isaiah 28. Look at verses 21-23:

In the Law [in the Old Testament] it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?

Paul takes them back to Isaiah's warning to the people of Judah. They had fallen into idolatry – they had become *unbelievers* – and so God brought the Assyrian army down on them. He warned them through his prophet that they would know that judgement had come when they sat in their besieged city, on the verge of starvation, and could hear the enemy voices coming to them over the walls – voices speaking in a tongue they wouldn't understand. Paul draws a disturbing comparison. The priests rejected Isaiah's message. They scoffed at him and were smug in their spiritual superiority. And Paul likens the Corinthian "Spirituals" to those unbelieving priests of Isaiah's day. Both were smug in what they thought was their own spiritual superiority. The priests rejected the authority of God's prophet and these Corinthian "Spirituals" were now rejecting the authority of God's apostle.

From the context we can gather that the Corinthians were arguing that their use of tongues in church was a potential sign for unbelievers – a positive sign of God at work – and Paul corrects them with this illustration from the Old Testament. "Yes," he says, "strange tongues are a sign, but not a good sign – they're a sign of judgement." He says that if they're all speaking in tongues and a visitor enters their service, he's not going to see God at work, but just like the scoffers at

Pentecost, they're going to think you're all drunk or crazy – or literally as the Greek says, possessed. That's not what they want and it's not what we want.

In contrast, prophecy provides the sign they wanted. The strange tongues the people of Jerusalem heard over the wall in Isaiah's day were a sign of judgement and condemnation sent by God on his unbelieving people. But consider, that for those people who were believers faithfully following after God, the prophecy that Isaiah spoke was a God-given message and sign of hope for them as they faced destruction and exile. Unlike tongues, prophecy communicates something intelligible. And prophecy has the potential for evangelistic impact. Look at verses 24-25:

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

No one's going to be so moved by a bunch of people speaking tongues that he falls on his face in repentance, but what Paul describes as the potential impact of prophecy is exactly that. A man or woman might enter the service and hear a prophetic message from God aimed right at him and be moved to repentance as he hears God speaking. Think of the Samaritan woman Jesus met at a well as St. John records in his gospel. She believed him as he prophetically laid open before her not only her life, but her heart as well. That's exactly what St. Paul is describing here. If we're going to use these gifts in our corporate gatherings, again, the goal is intelligibility that leads to *others* being built up – and potentially even evangelised. Both we, the insiders, and the outsiders need to hear God speak.

Paul uses this idea to transition into the next one. Look at verse 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.

In contrast to what he described in verses 23 and 24 where everyone was either speaking in tongues or prophesying, now he describes them all coming together to use their gifts in a way that shows the

diversity of the Holy Spirit's gifts in action.

Imagine what it does to the Church when the focus is entirely on one gift? What does it say to the person whose gift isn't tongues or isn't prophecy? It's like the body trying to be one giant eye or one giant hand and ignoring all the other body parts that God has given it. If you want to cripple ministry in the body of Christ, that's the way to do it – to emphasise one gift to the exclusion of others or to do what many have done in the last century in teaching that every Christian is supposed to speak in tongues. That's exactly what St. Paul is trying to correct here. And so now Paul describes the healthy church where everyone comes together to use the full diverse range of gifts the Spirit gives. Not the body trying to be simply an eye or simply a hand, but to be the whole body: eyes and ears, hands and feet, heart and brain.

And this is where Paul brings the idea of *order* to our worship. We need to use *all* the gifts – all the parts – of the body have, and that means fostering a place in which all are encouraged to use their gifts. In Corinth tongues and prophecy, but especially tongues, were made out to be the end-all-be-all of gifts and the result was that the other gifts were being excluded and squelched, so Paul gives some instructions here on how the gifts need to be regulated so that that doesn't happen. In this case he's showing specific regulations for tongues and prophecy, but in another situation it's entirely possible that some other gift or gifts might need to be regulated in a similar way. If that were the case, we can follow Paul's pattern here and learn how to apply this to other gifts to foster an environment that encourages everyone to share what the Spirit has given them for the upbuilding of the body. He addresses tongues in verses 27-28:

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

So he says, when it comes to tongues, the speaking is to be done one at a time (there needs to be order in the service), they need to be interpreted (because intelligibility is the key if we're looking to build up the

whole church), and there should be at most two or three if it happens at all (because one gift shouldn't dominate the gathering). What I find really telling here is that Paul doesn't rule out there might be a fourth or fifth person with something to say or that a person might have something to share in tongues, but is told to remain silent if there's no interpreter. It tells us something about how the gifts work and about the dynamic between the Spirit's work and the self-control of the speaker. What if there's no interpreter or what if there have already been three speakers? Paul says you need to remain silent. He doesn't say the Spirit isn't speaking to you, but he is pointing out that the compulsion of the Spirit is not such that the speaker ever loses control.

Now he switches over to addressing prophecy. Look at verses 29 to 33:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

Again, as with tongues-speakers, Paul limits the number of prophecies to two or three. The point is to make sure that the service isn't dominated by one gift to the exclusion of others. And like tongues, he calls for this to be done in an orderly fashion too.

Now in talking about prophecy, it's important that we not just talk about it, but that we define it too, because not everyone is on the same page as to what it means. The fact is that the words "prophet" and "prophecy" do have a wider range of meaning in some contexts than they do in others. The Old Testament really establishes the model, and that's that prophecy is God-given revelation that usually takes what God has already given in Scripture and applies it to his people in a specific circumstance – just as we saw with the Isaiah 28 passage that Paul quoted earlier. In some cases there may be an element of *foretelling* a future event, but the foundational principle of prophecy is always the *application* of what God has *already* told his people. It's for this reason that the preaching ministry has

almost always fallen to some extent under the prophetic label. The purpose of preaching is to explain and apply God's Word for his people. But that's not the narrower meaning used in 1 Corinthians. When it comes to the spiritual gift, we're talking about someone receiving and then passing on to others, some kind of divine revelation.

The difficult part is distinguishing between different types of prophecies. If we look at the Old Testament, the rule was that once a prophet was tested and approved, he wasn't to be questioned. It was understood that the prophet spoke for God and was to be obeyed. Disobeying the prophet was the same as disobeying God. In fact, what the prophets spoke was recorded as infallible Scripture.

The New Testament, however, tells us over and over that we are to test the prophets – to test them against the infallible words of Scripture and to make sure they measure up. The Holy Spirit will never tell us something through prophecy that's contrary to what he's already given us in Scripture. Paul told the Thessalonians to do the same thing. Jesus gives us the same warning too.

It's always possible that the prophecy isn't legitimate, but even if it is, it may still be a mixture of truth and error. In Acts 21 we have an excellent example of a prophecy that was genuinely from God, yet the prophet himself got it wrong. Agabus received a legitimate prophecy and then warned Paul against going to Jerusalem, telling him that the Jews would arrest him and hand him over to the Gentiles. Agabus did truly receive something from God, but when it came to the details, he was all wrong. Paul weighed it and went to Jerusalem anyway, where he was arrested not by the Jews, but by the Romans, and it was the Jews who formed a mob and tried to kill him.

The lesson is that while God may speak to us, whether in words, visions, dreams, or even by giving the general gist of a message, we're still prone to muddling that message, misunderstanding it, or skewing it for any one of a variety of reasons — from a desire for personal gain to our own doctrinal errors. And so the New Testament writers, like Paul, consistently tell us that the church has to *weigh* prophecy – to sift the wheat from

the chaff, or maybe even going back a step, to determine if it's truly from God at all.

If we understand that Paul is talking here specifically about prophecy and about evaluating it, the next couple of verses make perfect sense. Look at the rest of verse 33 through verse 36:

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

There was one last way in which the Corinthians were out of line in their use of prophetic gifts. Paul stressed the need to evaluate prophecy, but then in that context he now tells them: the women in your church need to remain silent when you evaluate the words given to you. If we lose that context these verses can be (and have been) used to keep women from having any part in the worship service – pitting Paul here against his own words in Chapter 11 where he assumes that women will both pray and prophesy.

The issue is one of authority. We already covered this back in Chapter 11 where Paul dealt with the issue of headship. He told us there that the head of every man is Christ, the head of every woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Paul isn't in any way restricting the use of spiritual gifts to one sex – he's restricting only their *weighing and evaluation*. He's restricting the *authority* role that's involved. Paul makes the same appeal – not to cultural norms, but to the order established in creation – in 1 Timothy 2:12-13:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve.

If it sounds similar to what Paul had to say about headship and authority in Chapter 11, it should. He's making the same appeal to the created order. Authority is the issue here and the Church is required to observe not only common good order when we worship, but God's created order

too – the same order that teaches the nature of Christ's submission to his Father and loving care for his bride. So Paul isn't saying that women are to shut-up and sit down and have no part in worship, but that when it comes to authority issues, like church governance or preaching and teaching (under which the weighing of prophecies falls), these things need to be handled by the men who have that authority.

And as he did with the head coverings issue, Paul addresses them in verses 33 and 36 saying, "Why should you buck the tradition of all the other churches, but even more so, why should you reject the Scriptures themselves? Are you so smitten with the revelations you've received that you dare to pit them against the authentic deposit of God's infallible words in the Scriptures and apostolic traditions? And if you think you're just interpreting those traditions under the Spirit's promptings, does it not disturb you to see that all the other churches understand those same texts to mean something different than you do? Are you the only ones the word of God has reached?" Paul writes some strong words, but it serves as a reminder to us of how serious it is to disregard Scripture. And that ties into Paul's final assertion of his own authority in verses 37-38:

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

Paul says, "You guys think you're spiritually mature. If you're really in tune with the Spirit, then you ought to recognise that what I'm writing to you – not just in this paragraph, but the whole letter – is from the Lord. In fact, not just 'from the Lord,' but that because I speak with apostolic authority, what I speak not only comes from Jesus Christ, but is as much a command to you as anything Jesus himself said. As an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul's authority was backed by Jesus Christ, and because of that submission to Paul's teaching was the same as submitting to the teaching of Jesus.

This takes us full circle, back to the beginning of Chapter 12. Remember that when Paul began this whole discussion

about "spiritual things" he told them that the indicator of someone's life in the spirit has nothing to do with what gifts they have, but that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was, in fact, evidenced by the confession that Jesus is Lord.

As Jesus said to St. Peter and as Paul stresses time and again in his epistles, it's only the Spirit who can indwell a person and turn the heart of a sinner toward God – to open his spiritual eyes to the reality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Confessing that Jesus is Lord is the true witness of a person's being indwelt by the Spirit. But now Paul stresses, it's not enough just to say it. The Corinthians said it. They made the profession of faith with their mouths. Now Paul says, you have to *do* it. And in this case doing it means submitting yourself to the Lord's commands. That's what lordship is about. If you won't submit to Jesus' commands, any profession you make with your mouth is a lie. As he says in verse 38, "If you don't recognise this, there will come a day when you yourself will not be recognised – just like those who will claim one day, 'Lord, lord, look at all the things we did in your name,' to whom Jesus will say, 'Depart from me. I never knew you.'"

With that in mind, let me close with Paul's own closing summary in verses 39-40:

So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy [Desire the gifts that build up others instead of yourself. Remember that what happens here is not about self, but about others.], **and do not forbid speaking in tongues** [Tongues is still a valid gift and in light of everything he's said, he doesn't want it forgotten. Ultimately we each need to be faithful in using the gifts we have – we simply need to use them in the ways God intended]. **But all things should be done decently and in order.**

Please pray with me: Father, thank you for gifting us for service in your kingdom. We ask that you would keep us faithful stewards of your gifts, but that we would also be faithful stewards of your commands – that we would not only profess the Lordship of Christ in words, but also in deed as we submit to the things he has told us. We ask this in his name. Amen.