

Lovingly in Order

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

By and large, we're used to a society that runs decently and in order. We have a few hiccups from time to time.

- Sometimes, there's an accident on the mountains and we get stuck in traffic.
- The bank queue may be twice as long as we expect.
- Someone turns up late for a business appointment.

Our schedule gets thrown around a bit from time to time. But most of the time, our society runs more or less like clockwork. We're used to that.

Sometimes we face problems when we encounter other cultures overseas. For example, when we were in Papua New Guinea, I had to renew my driver's licence. That involved getting my photo taken in Mt Hagen – an hour's drive away. I turned up and waited in the queue. When I got to the counter, I was told the camera operator wasn't in that morning, but should be in after lunch. Another woman was waiting. She said she'd tried several times to get her licence - but she couldn't get her photo taken:

- The camera operator wasn't there – he was sick or at lunch or morning tea.
- The camera was broken down.
- There was no film.
- This time she brought her own film with her.

Needless to say, when I came back after lunch, the camera operator still hadn't turned up.

Each culture has its own way of doing things – its own strengths and weaknesses. Some cultures (like ours) are good at getting things done, but not so good on relationships. Some cultures (like PNG) are good on relation-

ships, but not so good on getting things done. Yet, in any culture, there must be some agreed ways of doing things for the culture to operate – otherwise it's anarchy. It's like that in church as well. Paul deals with some of those ways of doing things in the second half of chapter 14.

The Context

Let me again remind you of the context.

- In chapter 12, Paul begins to answer their questions about spirituality and spiritual gifts.
 - The gifts themselves aren't evidence of any particular level of spirituality.
 - The gifts are distributed according to God's will.
 - The gifts are given for the common good.
 - Not everyone has the same gift.
- In chapter 13, Paul showed them *the more excellent way* – the way of love. That's much more important than being spiritually gifted.
- In chapter 14, Paul outlines some implications the way of love has for how they use their spiritual gifts in the church situation.
 - Last time, we noted it's important to understand what's going on. To speak in tongues in church isn't loving unless someone also interprets it.
 - This week, we'll see that having things done in proper order is also part of doing things lovingly.

The Church Meeting

Verse 26 forms a transition into Paul's next point:

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

Paul writes about the church meeting – *when you come*

together. Paul emphasises that whatever's done in the church meeting should be to build up others. The focus is ministering to others – not building my own reputation.

What's meant by *each one has a hymn*?

- Does it mean a hymn for the whole congregation or a solo piece?
- Does it mean a new composition taught to the congregation or something they already know?
- Are we talking about someone who has the gift of hymns (or some other form of music) or unmusical people picking their favourites?
- Is this something everyone in the congregation does so the church meeting includes as many hymns as people attending?

Many of these questions we can't answer with certainty. We can make guesses – but the passage itself doesn't really tell us, does it? And it's like that with some of the other things in that list as well.

But one thing does need to be said – this list isn't exhaustive of what went on in first-century church meetings. For example, prayer's not mentioned here – yet, chapter 11 tells us prayer was part of their meetings. Paul isn't here setting out details of their whole church meeting.

Order for Tongues Speaking

Paul's main point in this section is quite practical. He sets out rules on how to run some aspects of church. First, in relation to tongues-speaking – verse 27:

If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at the most three – should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

Three basic rules for tongues-speaking:

1. Three people at the most.
2. Each one in turn – not two going at once.
3. There must be an interpreter.

That's straightforward – though we aren't told how it's determined in advance whether an interpreter's present.

Why does Paul impose these rules? From the context, I take it this is part of the loving way to exercise gifts in the church meeting.

- It isn't loving to have more than one at once. That's competition. You can't listen to two people at once – you have to choose. People speaking at the same time will compete for the audience. That divides the body, rather than building up the body.
- Paul demonstrated in the first half of the chapter why it isn't loving if there's no interpreter. People can't be built up by what they don't understand.
- Why isn't it loving to have more than three? Some suggest it's because Paul wants to limit the prominence of tongues-speaking in Corinth. That may be true, but in the next verse he also limits the number of prophets to three. Paul doesn't say exactly. I suspect it's probably to do with the length of the meeting or how much the mind can effectively take in during one meeting.

Note some implications of what Paul says. **First**, people speaking in tongues control their gift. They don't lose all self-control. They aren't so taken over by their gift that they go into some ecstatic trance and can't stop what they're doing. If a fourth tongues-speaker wants to get up, Paul expects them to have sufficient control over the

gift not to get up. It's a question of love.

- Will I conform to these general rules established for the common good?
- Or do I think I'm so important or so spiritual that I'm the exception who can ignore the rules?

Secondly, Paul doesn't say the Spirit only sends a maximum of three tongues-speakers to any church meeting. It isn't a test to determine genuine gifts of tongues.

- If you're one of the first two, you're genuine.
- If you're the third, the jury's still out.
- If you're the fourth or later, you're fraudulent.

The Spirit may truly grant this gift to more than three people in one church meeting – but, if that happens, Paul expects the others to remain silent.

Order for Prophecy

Paul gives similar rules for prophecy. Verse 29:

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

This time, there are four basic rules.

1. Three people at the most.
2. Each one in turn – not two going at once.
3. Others are to evaluate the prophecy.
4. If someone else wants to prophesy, the one already doing it should stop.

The first two are basically the same as for tongues-speakers. The fourth one's along much the same line – it's to do with maintaining a decorum in the church meeting. It's perhaps not how we think in our culture. We'd more readily tell the next one wanting to prophesy to wait till the previous one finished. Maybe some people went on too long and didn't give others a chance.

I want us to think a little more about the implications of the third rule: that others evaluate the prophecy. What's that imply about the nature of this gift of prophecy?

- First, it implies the prophet isn't the ultimate authority in the church. When the prophet gives a message, it isn't just to be accepted at face value. It's to be evaluated by what's already known. It's to be evaluated by what's in the Bible. It's not even a matter of how reliable this prophet's been in the past. Each prophecy is to be evaluated.
- Secondly, it implies there are false prophecies. That's stated again and again in the Bible. God warns us to be careful of those claiming to speak for Him but who contradict what God's already said to us. God doesn't contradict Himself. So again, each prophecy is to be evaluated by what we've already received from God.
- Thirdly, some suggest Paul expects these Spirit-inspired prophecies in the church meeting to be a mixture of good and bad. I must confess I struggle with this one. I'm not sure.
 - On the one hand, I ask myself: how can a prophecy inspired by God's Spirit contain a mixture of good and not so good?
 - On the other hand, Paul doesn't instruct them what to do with people whose prophecies are

pronounced not good. He doesn't actually call them false prophets in this passage.

Perhaps the gift of prophecy contains a mixture of the Spirit and the one with the gift. Maybe it's like the gift of teaching or preaching – we recognise people are given these gifts by God, but we still evaluate what they preach or teach. From time to time they may get something slightly wrong – but we don't then label them false teachers overall.

- Fourthly, I think this gift of prophecy here is somewhat different from the written prophets that form part of the Old Testament.

How did this evaluation process work?

- Was there a prophecy and then a musical interlude while a group sat in a corner to evaluate the prophecy and report back to the church?
- Did the elders have a weekly meeting to evaluate all prophecies from the Sunday and then report back to the church which ones were acceptable?
- Did they have a democratic church meeting where everyone put in their two cents worth and then they took a vote?

I don't know. Paul doesn't go into details. Nor does Paul tell us what they did with the prophecies they rejected – or the people who spoke those prophecies. There are all sorts of unanswered questions.

Order for Evaluating Prophecy

Then we come to this difficult paragraph half way through verse 33:

As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the

Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

There are many interpretations of these verses. Let me summarise the main ones for you. **Number 1.** Some think women should keep absolutely silent in church – well, they can sing the hymns and say *amen* at the end of the prayers, but that's all. One big problem with that is chapter 11. There, Paul's quite happy for women to pray or prophesy – as long as they have their heads covered. Those arguing for this interpretation say chapter 11 refers to private settings (or maybe very small group meetings) – not the more public church gathering.

Number 2. Some think some women in the Corinthian church were noisy – either they chattered to one another because they were bored or they called out questions to their husbands about things they didn't understand. These suggestions need to grapple with why Paul *only* addresses women and why he seems to address *all* the women:

- Were no men involved in these noisy activities?
- Were there no educated women in the churches?

Paul doesn't say: I want all this disruptive chattering to cease during the church meeting. If that was the problem, wouldn't it have been easier to say that, rather than tell all the women to keep silent.

Number 3. Some people think a group of women in the Corinthian church were causing doctrinal problems. Several different doctrinal problems are put up as possibilities. On the basis of 15:12, some suggest these women claimed they'd already been resurrected and therefore no longer owed marital allegiance to their husbands. They

were set free in Christ – and they used that freedom in wrong ways.

- But is it only the women being led astray by these wrong doctrinal teachings?
- And why doesn't Paul deal more explicitly and directly with the doctrinal problems themselves?

Number 4. Some think verses 34 and 35 quote the Corinthian position. As we've seen, Paul seems to quote their letter at other places in his letter – perhaps he does the same thing here. They then argue that verse 36 is Paul's answer to their position. But nothing in the context suggests it's a quote. And, if it is a quote that Paul disagrees with, verse 36 doesn't really provide an answer to their position.

A major problem with all these interpretations is that they don't explain these verses in their context. Verses 37 to 40 show Paul hasn't finished with the subject of *spirituality* and *spiritual gifts* – yet most of those interpretations don't take that into account.

What I'd suggest is this: in these verses, Paul deals with the matter of evaluating what's said when people give prophecies in the church meeting.

- Women so gifted by God are able to prophesy in the church meeting. That's said in chapter 11.
- But women may not participate in evaluating the prophecies. At that point they're to keep silent.

Why? The reason's found in *the law* – a word Paul can use to refer to any part of the Old Testament (as can be seen from verse 21). Paul considers the order of creation establishes a pattern for the roles of husband and wife –

and more generally for men and women. He argues this way at several places in his letters – earlier in this letter (11:8-9) and in 1 Timothy 2:11-15. I think what he writes here is consistent with that.

Concluding Warning

Paul brings this discussion to a conclusion in verse 37:

If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Where's the ultimate authority in the church meeting? Fairly clearly, it's with God. It's God's church.

- He called it into being.
- It consists of His people.
- It exists for His purposes.

God's the One who directs the church.

How's He do that? Given we don't usually hear an audible voice from heaven during our meetings – how's God direct the meeting? In this passage, Paul allows the possibility of God's direction:

- through a tongue that's interpreted;
- through a word of prophecy; and
- through the exercise of other gifts.

Yet, those things are still subject to the church evaluating them – and they're still subject to Paul's apostolic authority. Paul's quite clear here that he expects those with the prophetic gift at Corinth to submit themselves to what he writes in these chapters (indeed, the whole letter) – for as an apostle he writes with God's authority.

Indeed, he says anyone with God's Spirit will recognise the rightness of what he writes. Anyone not recognising this is simply not spiritual and thus, in the long run, won't be recognised by God – which has some rather significant implications for those wishing to write-off aspects of Paul's teaching in the modern era.

Paul's argument has come full circle. Back in 12:1, he introduces this subject – now concerning *the spirituals*. Here, in 14:37, he addresses those who consider themselves to be *spiritual*. It's the same word. Back in 12:3, he wrote: *No one can say Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit*. Here, in 14:37, he refers to *the command of the Lord*. True spirituality isn't measured in terms of supernatural gifts. True spirituality is measured in terms of submission to the authority of Jesus.

Conclusion

Overall, the tendency at Corinth appears to be that their meetings were conducted in a disorderly way.

- People just went ahead, exercising their gift whenever they felt moved to do so.
- People were more concerned with personal preferences than with the needs and feelings of others.
- People exercised their gifts at the same time so that their meetings became confusing.

Rather than exercising their gifts for the common good, it seems the emphasis was to impress one another with the great spirituality of their gifts. That isn't the way of love. Love is considerate of others, rather than pushing oneself forward. Love does things decently and in order.

Our problem may be we've gone too far to the other

extreme.

- Our services are very ordered with few surprises.
- Our services lack much of the spontaneity that seems to be present at Corinth.

Some people see services like ours and say they're so well ordered there's no room for the Spirit to do anything. I think that's wrong. That equates spontaneity with the Spirit – that the Spirit only works when something's spontaneous. That's a very limited view of the Spirit's work or the Spirit's ability. Why can't a well-prepared sermon be just as inspired by the Spirit as a spontaneous one? Who says the Spirit can't be present in the hours of preparation someone puts into a sermon? Is the gospel of Luke any less a part of the Bible because Luke spent long hours investigating his sources?

But perhaps we should give some thought to allowing and encouraging more varied participation. Maybe some gifts aren't currently used – and perhaps as a whole we miss out because of that.

Overall, it's important to remember the thrust of these chapters.

- God gifts each of us differently.
- Those gifts are to be used for His purposes and for the common good in the church. We each have that responsibility.
- Those gifts are to be used in love.