

## 1 Corinthians 14

### Introduction

Paul has already dealt with the gifts of the Spirit, but he mentions them again here with new emphasis. He then deals with the issue of the place of women in the church.

### The gift of tongues in public worship

Much of the first part of the chapter deals with prophecy being far superior and more helpful than tongues in public worship. **He who prophecies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified** (1 Corinthians 14:5). There is much controversy about these words. Is prophecy similar to expository preaching, or “a word from the Lord through a member of the body, inspired by the Spirit, given to build up the body”, i.e. direct and fresh revelation? Is it no longer to be practiced and unnecessary because the canon of Scripture is finished and has sufficient revelation in it? Or is it still with us, but must be subordinate to Scripture which includes words from original prophets? Are tongues ecstatic utterances in no known language, or knowledge of foreign languages? Or a mixture of both?

We are going to draw out lessons of permanent value for our worship now. Our chief aim in worship is that the whole of the church be built up. Hence prophecy is more valuable than tongues which are addressed to God and not to be used except where there is interpretation.

Paul himself spoke with tongues, presumably in private devotions. But in public worship it is better to hear five words which we understand than 10,000 in an unknown tongue. Prophecy is far more valuable. It brings conviction to the unbeliever, and builds up the believer. Even prophecy is not to be overdone. Only two or three prophets to give prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:29).

God who gave these gifts is the God of peace and not of confusion. All things are to be done decently and in order. Paul, in all this, stresses he is not giving personal opinion, but commandment from the Lord. Anyone with spiritual discernment will recognise this.

There are lessons from this chapter for us. There would appear to have been varied kinds of meetings in the early church – some of which were quite informal. At first Christians worshipped in the Temple, and therefore used set forms of worship, though with Christian content. Yet there were also times of informal worship when they shared the Lord’s dealings with them and built one another up. Unplanned and impromptu. There is a place for both kinds of meeting. Do we neglect the more informal kind?

N.B. at the informal meetings there was much participation by members – contribution of hymn, word of instruction, revelation, tongue and interpretation. Orderly, but a real opportunity for those with a word from the Lord to share simply

and directly with the congregation. Need to be aware that there are dangers in this kind of set-up. There can be people who monopolize and take over. Trivial issues can take over. Even informal meetings need to be conducted with dignity and decorum. They must not be a free-for-all or spiritual anarchy. Participation in worship needs to be intelligent. Not intellectualism, which is spiritually barren, but must use understanding. C.f. some people love repetitious chorus singing because they can think of other things as they keep mouthing the same words.

Worship's aim is to realize God's presence in the midst, and building one another up. How easy for the minister to manipulate service for his own ends – to show off himself and his knowledge, humour and importance. The test is, will it glorify God and help others? A preacher should put heart into his congregation for the coming week. It must above all be apparent that God is in the midst. Martin Lloyd Jones, "I can forgive the preacher anything if only the service gives me a sense of God." The listener should go away singing the praises of the Saviour, and not singing the praises of the preacher.

### The place of women in the church

**Women should remain silent in church They are not allowed to speak If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home. It is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church** (1 Corinthians 14:34). How are we to interpret such strong words?

Some have taken this as a total prohibition. If the congregation recites the Lord's Prayer, only the men are allowed to join in. In responsive reading of the Scripture, only the men may read aloud. Presumably a woman may not even speak to a child. They also rule out women joining in hymn-singing.

Earlier, Paul had envisaged that women will pray and prophecy (1 Corinthians 11:5), though they were not to do so with heads uncovered. Where did they do this? It seems to imply women did take part in public worship in Corinth, for there is nothing to indicate this is a reference to informal ladies meetings, or family prayers. They would have to be veiled, because this was normally so in a public place, for otherwise they were under suspicion of loose living.

On the basis of this, we can say it is alright for women to pray and read the Scriptures. If prophecy has ceased, then the closest equivalent is the reading of inspired Scriptures through which God now speaks, and also prayer. Some people still object to women reading, on the grounds that reading with emphasis involves interpretation, and that is not permissible. If we take this to its logical extreme, we ought not to sing hymns written by women, for that is interpretation.

But here in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul clearly states women are to keep silence. Firstly, we must reject the idea that Paul is contradicting himself. He was not a fool. It is also highly unlikely because there is such a short space of time between writing chapter 11 and chapter 14. Possible explanations. (1) The women of Corinth were unruly, chatting and interrupting the service, questioning what the men were saying. If they wanted to know something, they should ask their husbands at home. (2) Forwardness in women was not customary in Jewish or Greek circles. Therefore Christians must

conform to the accepted standards and not allow suspicion of immodesty by Christian women. Anything suggesting defiance and failure to give their husband proper leadership had no place among Christian women. (3) Paul is referring specifically to women taking leadership in teaching and discussion in church. (4) The context is not passing judgement on prophecies spoken in church, and therefore that suggests there was usurping of authority going on. It was a teaching role which was in the hands of men, to decide what was true or false, in accordance to Law and creation order. Therefore Paul tells women to ask their husbands at home about these things.

If there are no prophecies today because now we have the New Testament Scriptures, which are sufficient, the issue of women judging prophecies is no longer relevant. But the principle of submission still remains. This is set forth most clearly in 1 Timothy 2:11-15, where women are forbidden to teach or exercise authority over men. This prohibition was not because women were uneducated and backward, or because the cultural situation was different back then. This is normally understood to mean women are not to teach publicly or hold ruling office in church. There are some recordings of women speaking in certain circumstances – Priscilla and Aquilla taught Apollus (Acts 18:26), Timothy was taught by his mother and grandmother (2 Timothy 1:5), older women were to teach younger women (Titus 2:3,4). Therefore it is alright for women to teach in homes and families, but not to be a public ministry. They are not to have authority over men – this is not just a question of local situation or special circumstances – this is what was established at Creation – the man’s headship. It is also because Satan deceived woman, and urged her to act independently of her husband, and therefore took the role which was not hers. Woman should have deferred to her husband. God’s order is God to man, and man to woman. Paul’s prohibition is not because women are incapable, but because man has permanent leadership role in male-female relationships.

**But women will be saved through child-bearing – if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety** (1 Timothy 2:15). Child-bearing is a figure of speech which is the mark of a woman’s role. What Paul is saying to Timothy is that woman’s salvation is worked out not through being teachers and rulers, but in developing true womanliness.

How does this work out on the mission-field situation, where, if women did not preach and teach, there would be no one to do it. Is it an exception because in that situation they are not supplanting any men and robbing them of their teaching role, for there is no man capable of dealing with that situation? Some people suggest a compromise. In the Old Testament there were prophetesses. Philips’ daughter prophesied. Priscilla taught. Women in Corinth prayed and prophesied. The Holy Spirit was poured out on all flesh, sons and daughters, and therefore the spirit’s gifts are to all for common good, and that includes the gift of teaching. Yet leadership and rule by the male is clear. So is the place of women to teach, but only as part of a team whose head must always be a man, and subject to male discipline. Under this compromise, women can exercise their gifts without exercising headship which is not theirs.

### Conclusion

These practical issues had particular relevance to the Corinthians church, hence Paul's need to address such specific points. But the teaching is still for today. In our worship, God must be in evidence, and everything should be done to glorify Him, and build up His people. Worship should be intelligent and dignified, and under the parameters set down by God in creation.