



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 21: Intelligent and Orderly Pt. 2... 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Now last week we dug into the first half of 1 Corinthians 14 and what we saw was that Paul was very much concerned about the issue of intelligibility. That is, he was intensely focused on the importance of being understood. Now his desire that the Corinthians strive to be understood in their worship was directed, in particular, toward the “tongues-speakers” in Corinth. We know that from the running comparison between tongues and prophecy. You see what Paul was concerned about was the fact the Corinthians had become completely eaten up with the whole subject of tongues. They believed that tongues, and by tongues I mean speaking in tongues, was the singular most important spiritual gift given to the church and because they believed that they considered tongues to be at the top of the list of gifts desired and they also thought that tongues ought to be at the top of their worship priorities. That is, they thought the exercise of tongues sought to be a priority in worship.

Paul, however, didn't buy it.

Paul believed that intelligibility was the most important issue in worship and the reason he believed that was because he thought building up the saints was more important than individual gratification.

Now the way Paul argued that was by arguing that five intelligent words were a lot more valuable to the assembled church in terms of edification than ten thousand unintelligible words spoken in tongues.

Now this is how he arranged his argument. In verse 1-5 he argued that prophesying was much more valuable than speaking in tongues simply because it was intelligible and edified the hearer. In verses 6-12, he buttressed his point with a couple of illustrations by making an analogy between human speech and a musical instrument. Then in verses 13-19, Paul argued that intelligibility was a benefit to believers in that it provided the opportunity for edification. While in verses 20-25, he argued that intelligibility was essential if unbelievers were ever going to hear the truth and have the opportunity to respond to it.

Now in today's study we are going to see Paul address the second half of his concern for corporate worship at Corinth and that concern is going to drive him to focus on the need for orderliness in worship. So, the first half of chapter 14 concerns the importance of intelligibility while the second half concerns the importance of order.

Now I have to admit just thinking about the topic of orderliness in worship it always brings to mind C.S. Lewis' famous quote in *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* where he writes the following about messing with the church's liturgy or order of service.

Novelty, simply as such, can have only an entertainment value. And they (and by “they” he means most church members) don’t go to church to be entertained. They go to use *the* service, or, if you prefer, to enact it. Every service is a structure of acts and words through which we receive a sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or adore. And it enables us to do these things best—if you like, it “works” best—when, through long familiarity, we don’t have to think about it. As long as you notice, and have to count, the stops, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don’t notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God.

But every novelty prevents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping. The important question about the Grail was “for what does it serve? Tis mad idolatry that makes the service greater than the god.”

A still worse thing may happen. Novelty may fix our attention net even on the service hut on the celebrant. You know what I mean. Try as one may to exclude it, the question “What on earth is he up to now?” will intrude. It lays one’s devotion waste. There is really some excuse for the man who said, “I wish they’d remember that the charge to Peter was Feed my sheep; not do experiments on my rats, or even, Teach my performing dogs new tricks.”

Thus my whole liturgiological position really boils down to an entreaty for permanence and uniformity. I can make do with almost any kind of service whatever, if only it will stay put. But if each form is snatched away just when I am beginning to feel at home in it, then I can never make any progress in the art of worship. You give me no chance to acquire the trained habit—

It may well be that some variations which seem to me merely matters of taste really involve grave doctrinal differences. But surely not all? For if grave doctrinal differences are really as numerous as variations in practice, then we shall have to conclude that no such thing as the Church of England exists. And anyway, the Liturgical Fidget is not a purely Anglican phenomenon; I have heard *others*¹ complain of it too.²

Now of course, Lewis is talking about messing with the form of the liturgy in this particular quote and his concern is not apples to apples with what was going on in

Corinth but it does seem to have at its heart an inclination toward orderliness that makes it useful for starting off our look into the text this morning.

Apparently, chaos ruled supreme in corporate worship at Corinth. It seems that people in the assembly were talking over each other (a bit like they do on some of the political talk shows you see on television these days shows like *Hannity and Colmes*) and were somehow vying for against each other for preeminence or center stage in their worship. And what Paul tells them to do is to get a grip on themselves and to begin to maintain a sense of decorum or order in their worship. Now he is not telling them to be mindless drones. Nor is he telling them to simply parrot what others are saying. You see what Paul wants is for the Spirit of God to be able to use the Word of God ministered through the gifts of ministry provided by God to edify the people of God.

Now when I decided to mention the possibility of a church's worship turning into some sort of mindless parroting it caused me to remember a story in a book written by James Adams entitled *Yankee Doodle Went to Church*. It is a little study on the colonial church in America at the time of the American Revolution. Mostly it's a serious book but it does contain this one wonderful little story...and you will see, I think, why it came to mind. Adams writes:

The story is told of a New England deacon who, because of failing eyesight, found difficulty in reading the first line of the Psalm *that he was lining out for the choir* and he apologized by observing: **"My eyes, indeed, are very blind."**

The choir thinking that what he had just said *was* the first line of a common-meter hymn immediately sang it; whereupon the deacon exclaimed: **"I cannot see at all."** This *line* the choir also sang.

Astonished at their lack of compassion, the deacon cried out: **“I really believe you are bewitched”** and the choir responded without missing a beat, **“I really believe you are bewitched.”**

Whereupon the deacon added, **“The mischief’s in you all,”** and after the choir had sung that *too*, the deacon sat down *overwhelmed with disgust*.³

You see that sort of mindless parroting is not what Paul wanted at all. Neither did he want them winging their way along in their worship. What Paul wanted was an intelligible service that had a measure of decorum and structure to it so that chaos and goofiness might find no home and in fact feel compelled to run for their lives.

Now all that having been said let’s turn at last to our text this morning in 1 Corinthians 14:26-40.

Now in verses 26-32, Paul argues that when they Corinthians come together for worship they are to impose a measure of order on their services. In order to do that properly, Paul tells the Corinthians that they need to set some guidelines or boundaries on who they allow to speak. Paul explains further that the reason boundaries and limitations must be set on who speaks and how they speak is because the goal must always be focused on the edification of the hearer.

Then in verses 33-36, Paul explains that this imposed orderliness is not the result of some axe Paul has to grind but rather a natural consequence of the fact that God Himself is orderly and an avowed enemy of chaos. And then finally in verses 37-40, Paul invokes his own apostolic authority to emphasize the importance of what he tells them regarding order and purpose in worship.

Now that having been said let's look at verses 26-32 where Paul reminds the Corinthians that their worship must have a measure of order to it. Look first at verse 26.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:26**...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.

Now Paul starts off the section with this wonderful little phrase, "What then, brothers?" The idea is pretty simple. What Paul is saying, "O.K. boys, here's how all that applies to you."⁴

He then says, "When you come together everyone has something to contribute." The idea itself seems to turn back to chapters 11-12 where Paul was pleading with the Corinthians to let everybody be included because God has spread the gifts around at Corinth. Some commentators seem to think the idea is really a bit more negative than that.⁵ That is they think Paul intends to be a bit more corrective, even negative. ⁶ They understand Paul to be saying something like this, "O.K. when you guys come together and everybody does whatever they want to do...nobody gets anything out it."⁷

But probably the idea is simply related to order. If that is the case then Paul is saying something like this, "O.K. because you are a fully gifted church, everybody has a gift and everybody wants to use their gift in worship but you can't do that all at the same time. Imagine what that would look like. Singing a hymn, relating a revelation or especially speaking in tongues are not in and off themselves the point of worship. Nor is any other thing in and of itself the point of worship. The only point of worship is Christ Himself and the building up of His body."

Now I am especially focusing on tongues here as a part of what Paul is trying to communicate not because I have any axe to grind but rather because tongues has been at the center of the discussion right along. You can tell that by looking at the next verse. But before I address that I ought to say that the word for hymn here is the word ψαλμός and it is almost certainly used to indicate some sort of new inspired composition rather than an Old Testament psalm which may not sit very well with the idea of exclusive psalmsody but we'll discuss that later.⁸ What Paul is focusing on is order and edification.⁹ Look at verse 27.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:27**...If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.

Now the first thing I want you to notice is that Paul does not forbid the practice of speaking in tongues. What he does do, however, is put some fairly stringent guidelines on the practice. First of all, Paul says that only one or two people or at the very most three may exercise the gift of tongues in any one service. He then focuses on the fact that they are to do what they do in turn. The idea is that they are not to try to talk over each other.¹⁰ Each one that is allowed to speak must do so in order. He then says that after they speak someone is to interpret what they have said...and that if there is no one to interpret they are to keep silent.

Now that raises a couple of important questions. First of all, how did someone in Corinth know whether or not there was going to be anyone there to interpret? That is how was anyone in Corinth to know in advance whether someone was there to explain what they say. And secondly it raises the question of whether

someone who spoke in tongues and no one to interpret was ever allowed to speak in tongues again.

Now I don't have answers for those questions except for the fact that it seems pretty clear from Paul's overall design and complaint about tongues that Paul expected "tongue-speakers" to pray for an interpretation in advance and to be prepared to give it along with "whatever they say in tongues" or to be quiet in worship and to use their tongues alone at home to edify themselves.

Now the word that is used to describe the meaning of what the tongues-speaker says is not "translate" in your ESV Bibles but rather "interpret". It is not that the word that is used in Greek never means translate. It does sometimes mean that. One example is Acts 9:36.

^{ESV} **Acts 9:36**...Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity.

But the translators of the ESV and most modern commentators take it to mean interpret on the basis that they think the tongues that are being described here are not regular language but rather ecstatic or heavenly language. Paul continues in verse 29.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:29**...Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

Now you ought to notice that Paul does not use the phrase here "at most" like he did concerning tongues. And the idea seems to be not that there are to be just two or three speakers at most like there were with tongues but rather that there are to

be just two or three speakers at a time before what they say is evaluated. In Greek the idea is that the others, the other church members, are to pass judgment on what has been said. I think the idea is that others are to be evaluated in terms of their faithfulness to what has been previously revealed and attested to be the Word of God.¹¹

I love what Calvin says here.

For it is of no small advantage, that there should be some that are skillful in judging, who will not allow sound doctrine to be perverted by the impostures of Satan, or to be otherwise corrupted by silly trifles. Paul, accordingly, teaches that the other prophets will be useful to the Church, even while they are *keeping silent* by judging what is said.

It may seem, however, to be absurd that men should have liberty given them to judge of the doctrine of God, which ought to be placed beyond all controversy. I answer, that the doctrine of God is not subjected to the scrutiny of men, but there is simply permission given them to judge by the Spirit of God, whether it is his word that is set before them, or whether human inventions are, without any authority, set off under this pretext, as we shall have occasion to notice again ere long.¹²

Now in verse 30, a different point is made.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:30**...If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.

The idea is that if a prophecy is directed toward one individual in the church, he is to wait for the first brother to finish before he responds. In other words, there is to always be a sense of decorum and order even when the prophesying is personal and directed toward someone.

Now in verse 31-32, Paul sums up his conclusion for this first small section. And the idea is that the Corinthians can contain themselves and exercise a measure of self-control even when they are being informed by the Spirit of God.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:31**...For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, ³² and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.

The idea is that no one should be out of control. There should be none of this business that a person feels compelled to speak so that they feel the freedom to run roughshod over another brother or sister. Paul says the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets meaning that no one speaking by the Spirit is ever out of control. C.K. Barrett puts it like this:

...a prophet may not plead, as some in Corinth may have done, that he must keep speaking because the Spirit compels him to do so; if there is reason for him to be silent, he can be silent.¹³

Now the reason they ought to be able to control themselves is because God does not breed confusion in His people. Look how Paul makes the point in the first part of verse 33.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:33**...For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

I love what Calvin says in his commentary here.

Here we have a most valuable statement, by which we are taught, that we do not serve God unless *we are* lovers of peace, and eager to promote it. Whenever, therefore, there is a disposition to quarrel, there, it is certain, God does not reign. And *yet* how easy it is to say this! How very generally all have it in their mouths!

Yet, in the meantime, *what we actually see is that most people fly into a rage about nothing, or they trouble the Church, from a desire that they may, by some means, rise into view, and may seem to be something important.*

Let us, therefore, bear in mind, that, in judging as to the servants of Christ, this mark must be kept in view — whether or not they aim at peace and concord, and, by conducting themselves peaceably, avoid contentions to the utmost of their power, provided, however, we understand by *this particular peace is a peace* of which the truth of God is the bond. For if we are called to contend against wicked doctrines, even though heaven and earth should come together, we must, nevertheless, persevere in the contest. We must, indeed, in the first place, make it our aim, that the truth of God may, without contention, maintain its ground; but if the wicked resist, we must set our face against them, and have no fear, lest the blame of the disturbances should be laid to our charge. For accursed is that peace of which revolt from God is the *union*, and blessed are those contentions by which it is necessary to maintain the kingdom of Christ.¹⁴

Now I think you can see that verse 36 is connected to verse 33 in a very real sense and that what lies in between is a bit of a sidebar. I want to address that sidebar but I want to make sure you see the connection between the first part of verse 33 and what occurs in verse 36. Look at verse 36 for a moment.

ESV 1 Corinthians 14:36...Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

You see what Paul asks in verse 36 is this, “Or are you alone the only place that the Word of God has come? Are you the only ones that it has reached?” Of course the Corinthians have to answer, “No, we are not the only ones that it has reached.” Now the implication that Paul is driving at is that since they are not the only ones that the Word of God has reached their behavior should not be marked off as radically different from all the others that it has reached...the point Paul is getting to is that they are out of control in a manner that distinguishes them from all the other churches in Christ’s Kingdom.

I love what Gordon Fee writes about this section. He says that Paul asks:

“Did the message of Christ originate with you?” he asks with sarcasm. “Are you the fountainhead from which all Christian truth derives that you can act so in this matter?” “Are you the only ones to whom it has come,” he asks further, “so that you can carry on in your own individualistic way, as if there were no other believers in the world?” This is biting rhetoric...Who do they think they are anyway? is the implication; has God given them a special word that allows them both to reject Paul’s instructions, on the one hand, and be so out of touch with the other churches, on the other?¹⁵

Paul continues that same train of thought in verse 37 by appealing to those that are spiritual or perhaps even better those who claim to be spiritual...that they ought to recognize and acknowledge the things he is saying here about decency and order. The explicit point he seems to be making is that some of their number have questioned his authority...but that if they are really spiritual they will understand and agree with his point about the nature of God forbidding the kind of chaos that had come to characterize their assembly. Look at how he says just that in verse 37.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:37**...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. ³⁸ If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. ³⁹ So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰ But all things should be done decently and in order.

Now before I go back and address those few verses starting in verse 33, I would like to say a word about this notion of orderliness. Presbyterians have been known throughout history for their commitment to doing things decently and in order. It is something you may have not experienced and may not have ever really learned to appreciate in your previous church experiences. But is something that we accept

as a sign and indication of being in conformity with the character of God. Hence in our session meetings we keep accurate records of what is said and voted on and discussed. We don't include every mind numbing detail of those meetings but we do keep records that indicate that the process was planned and orderly and thorough.

We do the same thing in regard to our worship.

We have a liturgy and we stick to it. We do that because we want to convey the idea both to our God and to all that worship with us that we take our worship seriously and that we have thought about it and want to pursue it in a way that reflects something of the nature of God and something of the peace of God we enjoy in Christ Jesus. Now that commitment should never lead you to think that our worship is stilted or dry...it may be stilted or dry but the fact that it is orderly and has been planned is not the thing that makes it so. No, if it is ever stilted or dry it is because we have brought to worship hearts that are stilted and dry and not sufficiently impacted by the gospel in a way that causes us to be tender toward Christ and His church.

Never let it be said that failure to prepare and to take the worship of God seriously is the key to having genuinely spiritual worship because when you think like that you are thinking like the Corinthians...and there is not much doubt from the text that most of what they did in worship was both contrived and self-centered.

Now let's look at that little sidebar in verse 33-34.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:33**...As in all the churches of the saints, ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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.

Now as you can imagine, this little passage causes all sorts of problems for the modern church. First and foremost it causes problems for the modern church because there are a great many people that think it is sexist. That is, there are a great many people that want to argue that because the passage says women should keep silent in the churches that it is the expression and thought of a male dominated culture and while the phrase is in the text, it is something that should be ignored in light of the increased level of sophistication that we have obtained in modern times. In other words, we should ignore the passage simply because our culture has developed insight and understanding to the degree that it no longer applies.

Secondly, there are a number of scholars...among them my favorite commentator on 1 Corinthians...that want to argue that the passage is an interpolation. That is, they want to argue that the passage was not actually written by the Apostle Paul but was inserted by a copyist later on in the process of making copies of the manuscript that he possessed. The way they imagine that it happened is that some previous copyist had written a gloss or a note in the margin of the text trying to explain the text at hand and that our copyist came along and inadvertently included the note in the margin into the text itself. That is they mistakenly included the note written in the margin into the Scripture and thus altered the Scripture itself.

Now in the case of our passage, you can see why modern textual critics would do that. They don't like what the text says and so they edit the text to their liking by simply saying it is a mistake for it to be there in the first place.

Now there are a few places where interpolations did actually occur. That is there are a few places where words were inserted into the text that were not put there originally by the biblical author. Now you may be asking, "O.K. Tom how do you know that?" Well, here's how we know that. Altogether, there are roughly about 5,700 Greek manuscripts or copies of the New Testament. Some of them are partial copies and some of them are full New Testaments. Some of them are very old (first century) and some of them are less than thousand years old (which is old if you are from East Texas but not so old if you are a biblical manuscript). The way you can find out if something might be an interpolation is you look at the manuscripts and compare them to see if the older manuscripts contain every word in the newer manuscripts. If for example you found that a certain verse did not contain a certain word up until the 10th century you could conceivably argue that the word was an insertion or an interpolation.

Now here's the thing. All of the ancient manuscripts of 1 Corinthians contain the verses found in 1 Corinthians 14: 34-35. Every ancient manuscript has them and all of the less ancient manuscripts have them, which means in East Texas terms that somebody wanting to excise them from the text has to do so solely on the basis of the fact that they don't like them being there.

Now my favorite commentator on First Corinthians is a man named Gordon Fee. He is a good man and conservative. He is not afraid to let the text say what it says. But, he wants to yank these two verses. Now his reasoning is a little bit different

than other, modern feminist commentators. His purpose in wanting to snip these two verses is that he believes they contradict 1 Corinthians 11:5.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 11:5**...but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven.

What Fee argues is that the verses in 1 Corinthians 14 are an interpolation or insertion because they cannot be reconciled with those verses in 1 Corinthians 11. Now he does that knowing full well that there are no manuscripts anywhere of 1 Corinthians that don't contain the verses themselves.

Now I like the man and I find his commentary sober and well thought out but I think I ought to point out that what he does here has an inherent danger to it. What he does is to say that the text is so problematic that it would be better to edit out the problem ourselves than to face the text straight up.

Now I have to tell you, that I think that is dangerous and that when someone does that without a really good reason it is tantamount to sitting in judgment on the Word of God.

Now that having been said, I thought rather than just tell you how other commentators deal with the verses I would simply let you read someone that addresses the problem for homework. The person I want you to read is a man named D.A. Carson and his discussion of the text is from a book entitled *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*.¹⁶ I have made a copy of his article and am going to attach it my lesson as an appendix and put it on the webpage so you can see how a faithful, careful conservative scholar deals with the text as it lays. If

you have additional questions about the passage I'll address them next week at the beginning of class. Are there any questions?

Let's pray.

¹ "Roman Catholics"...I edited this phrase out to make it a bit more applicable to my audience. Forgive me Brother Lewis.

² C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc., 1991), pp. 4-5

³ James L. Adams, *Yankee Doodle Went to Church: The Righteous Revolution of 1776* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1989), 63. Slightly edited by me to fit the context.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), pp. 690. Fee summarizes the comment as "What's the upshot of all this?"

⁵ F. W. Grosheide, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1953), pg. 336. "We may suppose that the members of the church who possessed special gifts abused the divine services to be heard."

⁶ David E. Garland, *1st Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 657. Garland argues that the terse language has caused some commentators to see more than the words say in themselves.

⁷ Gordon Clark, *1 Corinthians: A Contemporary Commentary* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), 238. Clark writes this, "These verses make a little clearer—what has been repeatedly referred to in the preceding verses—the great confusion in Corinthian church services. "Each one," in other words, nearly everybody wanted to talk, and they did so all at the same time. Edification was at a minimum."

⁸ C.K. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 327. See also Charles Hodge, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 14:26. He writes, "A psalm, a song of praise to God. This can hardly mean one of the Psalms of the Old Testament but something prepared or suggested for the occasion. One was impelled by the Spirit to pour forth his heart in a song of praise."

⁹ Charles H. Talbert, *A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Crossroads Publishing: New York, 1987), p. 91.

¹⁰ I love what Charles Hodge writes here, "Under such circumstances confusion could hardly fail to ensue." It is typical of Hodge to engage in understatement.

¹¹ Garland, pg. 661.

¹² John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 14:30.

¹³ Barrett, pg. 329.

¹⁴ John Calvin, 14:33.

¹⁵ Fee, pg. 710.

¹⁶ D.A. Carson, "Silent in the Churches: On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36" from *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, (Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway Books, 2006), 140-153.