

The Book of 1 Corinthians

Lesson 12: Orderly Worship and the Use of Gifts -- 1 Corinthians 14:1-40

Imagine walking into a worship service where everyone is talking at once. One person is speaking in a language no one understands, another is shouting over him, three more are trying to share something, and a visitor stands in the doorway, bewildered, wondering if he has stumbled into a madhouse. That, more or less, is what was happening in Corinth. The gifts God had given to build up the church had become a chaotic free-for-all, with everyone competing to display the flashiest gift, especially the gift of tongues, while almost no one was actually being helped.

So Paul, having lifted them to the heights of love in chapter 13, brings them back down to the very practical question of how a church meeting should actually work. His governing principle is simple and it runs through the whole chapter like a steady drumbeat: everything must be done to build up the church. That is the test for every part of worship. Not is it impressive, not does it make me feel something, but does it build up the body? By that standard, Paul says, prophecy, which everyone could understand, far outranked uninterpreted tongues, which left the church no better off than before.

Paul cares about being understood. He would rather speak five words people can grasp than ten thousand words in a tongue no one follows. He cares about the visitor and the outsider, who should be able to come in and encounter the truth so clearly that they fall on their faces and declare that God is really among us. And he cares about order. God, he reminds them, is not a God of confusion but of peace. So worship should not be a chaotic scramble but should proceed in a fitting and orderly way, with people taking turns, with self-control, with everything aimed at the good of all.

Within this call to order, Paul also gives clear instruction about the roles of men and women in the assembly, teaching, as he did in chapter 11, that God has established an order in his church that is good and to be honored. These are matters our culture finds difficult, and they deserve to be handled with both clarity and grace. Paul closes the whole discussion with a sentence worth writing over every gathering of God's people: "All things should be done decently and in order." Read this chapter and let it shape the way you think about worship, not as a performance to watch or a stage to perform on, but as the family of God gathering to build one another up in love, under his good order, for his glory.

Group Discussion: Paul's governing principle for worship is that everything be done "for building up" the church (14:26), measuring every part of a gathering not by how impressive or moving it is but by whether it edifies the body. How might it change the way we think about our own worship if we asked of everything, "Does this build up the church?" rather than "Did I enjoy it?"

Personal Reflection: Paul assumes that each believer comes to the assembly ready to contribute to the building up of others, not merely to receive (14:26). When you come to worship, are you more of a spectator hoping to get something, or a participant looking to build others up? What is one way you could come ready to give and encourage this week?

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1–40

Study Questions

1. Paul urges the Corinthians to “pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy,” because the one who prophesies “builds up the church,” while uninterpreted tongues edify only the speaker (14:1–5). Why does Paul rank the gifts by how much they build up the church, and what does this teach about the true purpose of everything that happens when God’s people gather?
2. Paul measures the value of a gift by whether it helps others, not by how it makes the user feel. When you come to worship or serve in the church, how often is your focus on what builds others up rather than on your own experience or preferences? Where do you need to shift from consuming to contributing?
3. Paul says he would rather speak “five words with my mind ... than ten thousand words in a tongue,” so that others may be instructed, insisting that worship engage the understanding and not just stir up feelings (14:6–19). Why does Paul place such a high value on being understood and on the mind being engaged in worship?
4. Paul wants both mind and spirit fully involved in worship, not empty ritual or mere emotion. Is your own worship more often thoughtful and engaged, or distracted and going through the motions? What would it look like to bring your whole mind and heart to worship this week?
5. Paul says that if an outsider or unbeliever comes in and finds clear, understandable truth being declared, “the secrets of his heart are disclosed,” and “he will fall on his face and worship God and declare that God is really among you” (14:23–25). What does this teach about how our gatherings should take into account those who do not yet believe, and about worship as a witness to outsiders?
6. How aware are you of visitors and outsiders when the church gathers, of whether a newcomer would sense that God is truly among us? What is one way you could help make our worship and fellowship more welcoming and intelligible to someone who does not yet know Christ?
7. Paul directs that worship proceed in an orderly way, with people taking turns, with interpretation, with self-control, “for God is not a God of confusion but of peace,” concluding that “all things should be done decently and in order” (14:26–33, 40). What does this teach about God’s own character and about how that character should be reflected in the way the church conducts its worship?
8. Paul links orderly worship to the very nature of God, who is a God of peace and not confusion. Where in your own life, your habits, relationships, or service in the church, do

you tend to bring confusion or disorder rather than peace? How might reflecting God's orderly, peaceable character change that?

9. Paul instructs that "the women should keep silent in the churches ... they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says," and he insists that what he writes is "a command of the Lord" (14:34-37). Understood alongside the headship principle of chapter 11, what is Paul teaching about the roles of men and women in the assembly, why does he ground it in God's order and his own apostolic authority rather than mere custom, and how can the church honor this teaching clearly while deeply valuing the many vital ways women serve in Christ's church?
10. Look back across the whole chapter. Paul calls the church to pursue love, to build one another up, to welcome the outsider, and to worship in the good order God designed. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from 1 Corinthians 14 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Timothy 2:8-12, instruction about men and women in the assembly; 1 Corinthians 11:3, the headship principle behind orderly worship; Colossians 3:16, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; Titus 2:3-5, older women teaching and training the younger women; Acts 18:24-26, Priscilla and Aquila privately explaining the way of God to Apollos