

Instructions for worshipping together

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

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When you come to church or a small group, what are you hoping for? What are you expecting? Some are merely hoping for inspiring music or a meaningful sermon. Some are hoping for good conversations with friends. Some are struggling with difficulties and are hoping for a word of encouragement. Some are needing peace. Some are facing an uncertain future and are in need of direction. Some are alone and are in need of fellowship. . . What do you hope for? Do you expect much? Why are you here? In 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, we can see one of Paul's expectations:

²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ 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.

Can you imagine a church where that happens? Where people hear God's Word, are convicted of their sin, and in response fall on their face worshipping God? A church where the presence of God is so strong that people's lives are being dramatically changed? Where marriages are being healed? Forgiveness is freely given? Where people are becoming more and more like Jesus, and non-believers are coming to Jesus Christ on a regular basis? Where people are being called to missions and ministry, and the testimonies of God's working is a normal occurrence?

In these verses in 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, Paul is trying to help the Corinthians worship together in such a way that it ushers them into the presence of God. Not that they could do anything that would force God to work in their midst, but Paul was giving them biblical guidelines to show them how to prepare the soil for the working of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible does not give us details about how the early Christians worshipped. We see general principles, but not their order of worship or how they administrated their worship services. How much did they sing?

What was the preaching like? Did they have an invitation? Did they take an offering? Were there ushers? It does not say. That is why we have so many forms of worship and rituals in the Christian church today. That is the beauty of it. We are given Biblical principles of how to worship, but we are free to worship as the Spirit leads in a way that is most meaningful to who we are.

To better understand chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians, we must look back to what Paul had already written up to this point in this letter. The church in Corinth was a troubled church. Sin and selfishness were rampant. In chapter 1, we see their selfishness in their infighting and division. Some claimed to follow Paul, others claimed to follow Apollos, others claimed to follow Peter, and others claimed to follow Jesus. To see that they were bringing Jesus down to the same status as their teachers is evidence of how far they had drifted from the truth. In chapter 5, we see their selfishness by how sexual immorality had come into the church and not been confronted. In chapter 6, we see their selfishness when we read about the lawsuits that they had against one another. In chapter 8, we see their selfishness when Paul addresses a kind of knowledge that was making some people in the church prideful. In chapter 10, we see their selfishness when Paul writes to those whose self-righteousness was making them susceptible to temptation. In chapter 11, we see their selfishness when Paul addresses women who had decided to present themselves in church in a way that dishonored themselves, their husbands and those in the church. Later in chapter 11, we see their selfishness when Paul spoke of those who, when they came together to eat and observe the Lord's Supper, were drunk and gluttonous, while others in the church sat there with no food to eat at all. In chapter 12, we see their selfishness when because of their spiritual gifts, some thought of themselves as more important than others.

This all brings us to chapter 14. In chapter 14, we see that this same selfishness that plagued the Corinthian church had brought chaos into their worship services. Paul's response to their selfishness focuses on this one phrase, "building up the church". We see it in verse 3, verse 4, verse 5, and verse 17. In verse 12, Paul explains it with these words: *"Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church."* This was Paul's answer to their selfishness. Take your eyes off of yourself and focus on the building up of others. In their own power this would be impossible, but with Christ it could be done. Paul believed that God-honoring worship could be restored in the Corinthian church. With this in mind He begins with these instructions:

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.

We should not read this as a comprehensive list of all the parts of corporate worship. Paul was primarily bringing to their attention the portions that were most related to the subject at hand.

When the Corinthian church came together, they seemed to have been much more informal than what we are used to today. That might have been because they were smaller. In a small group setting more people are free to share. It requires less structure. That was likely their situation. Maybe there were 30, 40, 50 or 60 people. There is definitely a benefit for being a smaller church. The larger the church, the more formality is needed to retain order. This also means that everyone will not have the opportunity to share.

We see in this verse that worship was not to be one person leading everything. Worship is not to be a religious event where one leads and everyone else comes to spectate. There is to be an active involvement of all in the congregation. At first glance this verse seems to say that each one is supposed to bring a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue and an interpretation, but we must pay attention to the word “or”. Paul is listing out examples of the possible contributions that one may make during the worship in the Corinthian church. The main focus of this verse is not to describe all of the different ways that one can be involved in worship. The main point is that whatever is done must build up those in the congregation. One may be a great speaker, or singer, or reader, or prayer or musician, but if their contribution or their manner of presenting will not build up the others who are present, then it must not be done.

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. ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. ³⁰ If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. 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. ³³ For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

At this point we must seek to understand Paul’s letter without knowing the complete situation about which Paul writes. We do not know exactly what the worship of the Corinthian church was like, but we can understand a good amount from Paul’s writings.

From Paul’s writings we see that the gatherings of the Corinthian church were chaotic. In the midst of their times together, multiple people would start speaking in tongues and without an interpreter. The congregation was not being built up at all. No one knew what they were saying, and they were not even taking turns. They were speaking unknown tongues at the same time. Paul instructed them to limit those speaking in tongues to only two or three, to take turns, and only if there was an interpreter so that the church would be built up. If those conditions were not met, then those who desired to speak in tongues were to remain silent.

Much of this might have been motivated by the selfishness that we have already discussed. They were not submitting to one another. They were not building up those in attendance. They were not waiting their turn. In the Corinthian church speaking in tongues had been elevated in importance above prophecy. Perhaps the Corinthians had gravitated towards the speaking in tongues because it seemed more “spiritual”, but prophecy was the one that was truly building up the people.

Paul gives similar instructions to those who are prophesying. The benefit of prophecy was that the people understood what was being said, but from Paul’s words it seems that either too many were wanting to share a prophecy, or possibly only one was speaking and it would be more beneficial if more than one would speak. Paul also instructs that each prophecy be weighed to see its validity. This is similar to the Bereans that we read about in Acts 17 who examined the Scriptures to see if Paul’s words were from God. Scripture is inerrant, but a prophet is not. A word from God through a prophet must be submitted to the scripture if it is to be considered as a word from God.

Paul encourages the orderly involvement of all and so that all may be built up. Some might argue that their contribution in worship is Spirit-led so they have no control over it, but Paul makes very clear in verse 32 that ***“the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets”***. It is possible to follow Paul’s call to order. One who is spiritual will have the ability to constrain the tongue, prophecy or revelation which he has been given until the opportune time.

Why should the Corinthian church submit to Paul’s call to order? Because ***“God is not a God of confusion but of peace.”***

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.

At first glance these verses are somewhat puzzling, but as always, we must step back and seek the larger counsel of scripture to better understand Paul’s intended meaning. What was happening? It is hard to say. While we would like more details and a larger explanation, those in Corinth were familiar with the situation to which Paul was referring and no greater explanation was needed.

From Paul’s words we know that women in the church were speaking in a way that was shameful. It might have been some of the same women from chapter 11 that were dishonoring themselves, their husbands and the church by not wearing head coverings. Maybe it was what they were saying or how they were saying it. Maybe they were visiting or chatting in a disruptive way during the service. Maybe they were asking questions that were inappropriate in the midst of the church gathering or divisive in manner. Maybe they were contradicting their husbands publicly in a dishonoring manner with issues that would have better been resolved at home in private. We know that in Greece women had more rights and freedom than in other places. Possibly there were women in the church that through their words and actions were refusing to relate to or submit to the church elders and teachers as needed. We do not know for sure.

Women, in this day, often lacked education. It could be that the women sincerely sought to learn, but they were distracting others with their questions that could have been better answered at home with their husbands. Like our church, our worship services are not designed to be a time of question and answers.

Some scholars see the previous verses about weighing of prophecies and believe that these women were wanting to give their opinions of the prophecy when it was possibly only the responsibility of the prophets and leaders of the church.

Do these verses mean complete silence, the entire time that a woman is at church? If so, that would mean that women cannot sing, cannot visit with others, cannot teach, cannot serve in any capacity where spoken communication would be needed.

Let's look at scripture. We see in 1 Corinthians 11 that because of the customs of their day Paul instructed the wives to not pray or prophesy with their heads uncovered. This implies that they could pray or prophesy if done in the correct manner. This means that his instructions for silence were not absolute. The instructions to the women in this situation have a context. Women are not the only ones instructed to be silent in this passage. Paul instructed those who speak in tongues to remain silent if there is no interpreter. Paul instructed a person with a revelation to stop and be silent if a second person receives a revelation. Both of these instructions were for temporary silence for the sake of order and the building up of the people in the congregation.

In 1 Timothy 2:8 Paul instructs men to pray *"without anger or disputing"*. This was because the problem with prayer was happening only amongst men. In the same way, this situation of disorderly conduct was happening only with the women, so Paul addressed only the women.

Scripture does address gender roles in the home and in the church, but in this passage the main focus was that of building up the church by not causing disorder. In their culture and in their church setting, Paul was calling on the women to join the effort as the church sought to regain God-honoring order in their gatherings.

Paul concludes the chapter with these final verses:

³⁶ Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? 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.

These verses show us that Paul was expecting some of the people in the Corinthian church to disagree with him. He just reminds them that they were not the creators of God's Word and they are not the only people who have come to faith in Christ. If anyone sees themselves as spiritual, it will be confirmed by their acknowledgment that Paul's words are a command of the Lord.

We share a similar crossroads. Will we submit to God's Word as the eternal truth of God, or will we only submit to God's Word when it is convenient or logical? As followers of Christ we do not have that option. We are a people of the Word. That means we study it, seek to understand it, believe in it, submit to it, obey it and are blessed by it.

Now that we have walked through this passage, let us take some time to apply it.

Some struggle with Paul's call to order because it seems to restrain the Spirit's moving, but is that really so? Order does not restrain the moving of the Spirit, it releases it. Let's use a worldly example. Think about the M-30. If there is no order, or no traffic laws, or no lines painted on the road, will it free up traffic or bring it to a halt? Or even if there are laws and lines but no one obeys them, will it free up the traffic or stop it?

The Spirit of God works in much of the same way. In scripture we find that God has given us guidelines for worshipping. As we submit to His teachings, we put ourselves on the track where God's Spirit is free to flow and work among us.

There is individual worship and there is corporate worship. Individual worship and devotion is very unique and personal to one's own natural ways of worshipping God. Corporate worship is different. It is an occasion to love God and to love neighbor. It is a coming before the throne of God and bowing our hearts together at the feet of the King of kings and Lord of lords. In the midst of this, the only acceptable worship is that which builds one another up.

In our multi-cultural church, our manner of worship can either be a source of conflict, where we argue about worship style, or a testimony to our unity in Christ. I praise God that it continues to be a testimony to our unity in Christ. I thank God for each of you who come together each Sunday, stand side-by-side with people from many nations, and continue to worship God in a faithful manner.

We must remember that worship is a lot larger than music on Sunday. Worship is a way of life. It is as we follow Christ during the week that we are prepared to worship Him together on Sunday.

We must remember that Paul was not teaching this way just to give strict rules for worship. Paul was speaking from what he had learned about how God can work in the midst of the church. Paul knew what was possible when God's Word and God's Spirit come together with God's people. Paul is seeking to lead the church of Corinth into the fullness that is available to them in Christ Jesus.

God wants the same for us, but to what extent are we committed to build each other up? In our worship services it could be expressed in different ways. The main focus is thinking less of ourselves and more of others. It is arriving with a humble heart and nothing in our lives that would quench the working of the Spirit. It is not allowing there to be conflict between yourself and someone else in the church. If you are on the worship team, it is in practicing for excellence and leading us in a humble manner. It is dressing modestly for the good of others. For a pastor, it is being prepared for the sermon and presenting God's Word humbly and in a way that pleases God. For some of our volunteers, it is working with our children so parents can be in the worship service. For some, it is being on a prayer team that prays for the church during the sermon time. For others, it could be praying for those around you during the invitation time. For some, it could be moving away from the aisles so there is more room for people to sit. For a parent, it could be removing their crying infant from the auditorium so that others can concentrate on God's Word. Imagine what would happen if after the service we spent several minutes meeting those who we don't know, before we visit with those that we do know. How we build each other up will come naturally, if our hearts are focused on God and others. There could be various ways to build up the church, but it all begins with asking God to give us a love for the church and the people in it. A congregation that loves God and serves each other is laying the groundwork for God to work in their midst.

Discussion questions:

1. In your opinion, why do you think people come to church?
2. What about this passage of scripture and lesson was most meaningful to you?
3. When you come to church, what are you hoping for or expecting?
4. What were some of the factors that were hindering the worship in the Corinthian church?
5. Paul's solution was to "build up the church". How would you summarize that in your own words?
6. What do you think God wants you to remember from this lesson?
7. What do you think God wants you to do because of that?