

PREFACE

One of the important and central takeaways from the passage in our previous session (vv26-29)—and which continues in the next passage—is that, contrary to the position of many today, the use of some Spirit-gifts is not synonymous with an ecstatic, trance-like, out-of-control mind and behavior.

Some Spirit-gifts are indeed more supernatural than others: the biblically sound employment of tongues is indeed more supernatural than, say, the gift of “helps” (12:28); the gift of healing, though rare today, is indeed more supernatural than the gift of teaching. But no matter how extraordinary and supernatural the Spirit-gift, *the element of self-control is not removed.*

Regarding the gift of tongues in the assembly, Paul commands, “...it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God” (vv27-28). Paul could not so command, or expect others to obey the command, if in the use of that gift there could be no self-control exerted. And in our passage today we have the apostle expressing a similar level of self-control regarding prophecy.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:29-33.

v29

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

In our previous session we saw that the guidelines for prophecy in the public assembly are similar—but not identical—to those for tongues: so that the body can be edified, there is to be order. And Paul’s injunction for the inclusion of prophecy goes beyond just limiting the number at any one time: just as tongues are to be interpreted, prophecies are to be evaluated—*diakrinetosan*, which means to separate one from another, to distinguish, judge, discern, evaluate. And the conclusion reached is that those who evaluate the prophecy come from the members of the assembly, rather than being limited to other prophets.

v30

But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent.

I take from this that along with there being *order* in the service, there is also to be *courtesy*—deference shown to another.

Let me reiterate that while I do not agree with those who claim that *all* authentic tongues and *all* authentic prophecy ceased at some point early in the church age, those two Spirit-gifts today are *different* from what they were before the completion and distribution of the canon of Scripture. And this difference may offer another reason for the injunction of v30 in the first century beyond mere courtesy—one that may be less necessary today.

Imagine an “assembly,” what we would call a worship service for the Corinth church around the time Paul was writing this letter. We don’t know the number of its members, so let’s just pick a round number of thirty individuals sitting casually in a room in someone’s home, or maybe outside the city by a flowing stream (cf., [Acts 16:13](#)). Those assembled are a mix of Jews, Greeks, and other backgrounds. The Jews would be reasonably familiar with the Scriptures—what we would call the OT, but what they might call “the Law and the prophets,” or just “the Law.” Some of the others might know *about* the Jewish Scriptures, but would not have studied them, or even heard them read.

No one in the church would have read any of the four gospel accounts about Jesus, since the earliest accounts by Mark and Matthew were—at best—just being written; Luke’s will be written in the next decade, and John’s will not be written for another 30 to 35 years. The only books in our NT that may have been written by then were the epistle of James and, maybe, Paul’s letter to Galatians—but this letter to the Corinthians may well have been his first.

Thus just about everything the members of the Corinth church knew about Jesus, the Christian faith and its doctrine, they knew by word of mouth—and mostly from Paul and his fellow workers speaking in their midst, along with a couple of his written letters. Other than Paul’s first letter (now lost) and the second (which we have as *First Corinthians*), they had no written resource, no handy reference to know the mind of God in Christ. Just as OT Israel relied on prophets to know the mind of Yahweh, the early Christians relied on the spoken word to know the mind of Christ.

Read Hebrews 1:1-2.

The gifts of tongues and prophecy for the Christian church have not ceased, but they have changed—more accurately, they are now a subset of what they once were. Regarding prophecy in the church, in the first century that prophecy could have delivered fresh knowledge, fresh understanding to a relatively ignorant assembly. Unlike God’s OT prophets, the Christian prophets in the first century did *not* speak *ex cathedra*—that is, even if dispensing new knowledge, their words still had to be evaluated to insure they fit into known doctrine (v29).

The early church prophets could also do as prophets today, exclaim not new knowledge, but a fresh *reminder* of that which is already known: that is, the appropriate word of exhortation at just the right time.

So in the first century especially, deference was to be given to someone who had been given a “revelation” (as in the KJVs, actually a verb: *apokalypthe*), a flexible word that Paul uses in a variety of ways, so we can’t be dogmatic about how he uses it here. For example, look at its use in v6.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6.

Note: “...unless I speak to you **either** by way of revelation **or** of knowledge **or** of prophecy **or** of teaching” (emphasis added). This statement seems to differentiate between revelation, knowledge, prophecy, and teaching. Yet in v30 he seems to use it interchangeably with prophecy. About all we can say is that it is “some kind of utterance given by the Spirit for the benefit of the gathered community” (Fee). To maintain order in the assembly, and to allow for the possibility that the other person has something more important to share from the Holy Spirit, the first speaker is to give way to the second.

v31

For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; Just as with tongues in the assembly, Paul declares that those who prophesy must do it one at a time, not all at the same time—which would, of course, result in a similar unintelligible cacophony, even if in the native tongue.

In his comparison of prophecy to tongues at the opening of this chapter, Paul wrote in v3, “But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.” After worship of our God—which I consider the believer’s highest priority—we assemble at least once a week to learn; to be built up in the faith individually, and to be built up as a cohesive unit (i.e., the church); part of being that cohesive body of Christ is to console, to comfort and encourage those who are our brothers and sisters in the faith. In this chapter Paul also lumps all of these under the word edification, as in v12: “So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church,” and the end of v26: “Let all things be done for edification.”

v32

and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets;

As Gordon Fee writes,

With these words [in vv32-33] Paul lifts “inspired speech” out of the category of “ecstasy” as such and offers it as a radically different thing from the mania of the pagan cults. There is no seizure here, no loss of control; the speaker is neither frenzied nor a babbler.

As written, this verse sounds as if it is saying, “the spirits of prophets are subject to *other* prophets,” perhaps referring to those who would “pass judgment” (v29). But as Fee points out, this is saying that the prophet remains in control over when and how he delivers what the Holy Spirit has given *his* spirit to say. That is, this verse follows up on v30: “The impulse to speak may still be present, but the speaker can restrain those impulses and must yield the floor to another who receives a revelation” (Garland). And now we come to v33.

v33A

for God is not a God of confusion but of peace,

The first half of v33 offers a perfect summation of Paul’s thesis. Our God is not the “author” (KJV) of chaos; that comes from somewhere else, as James points out, giving us a pretty accurate picture of what was going on in Corinth.

Read James 3:13-18.

The word “confusion” in the NASB (*akatastasia*) means disorder, instability, tumult. It is not God’s Holy Spirit bringing that into the assembly of the church, but flesh, incited by the adversary.

v33B

as in all the churches of the saints.

We now are faced with another controversial moment in this letter—and this even before we get to “women should keep silent”!

Scholars, commentators and even our popular versions are divided on whether the second part of v33 goes with v33a or with v34. That is, should it be read

for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. The women are to keep silent in the churches... (NASB, NIV2011, KJVs)

or

for God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women are to keep silent in the churches... (ESV, NIV84, CSB)

?

Remember, there was no punctuation, distinguishing letter case, or even spaces in virtually all the original manuscripts for the Bible (a form referred to as *scriptura continua*). So here and there in God's word differences of opinion may arise in passages such as this.

What impresses this layman is how thoroughly the opposing sides can usually validate their position with scholarly evidence: Greek syntax, grammar, whether the text sounds "Pauline" or not. Since all these interpreters invariably know better than *this* teacher, this makes it a challenge to decide which interpretation is correct. In this instance, our two principal commentators come down on opposing sides, with John MacArthur in agreement with David Garland that v33b should go with v34.

Gordon Fee, in this instance, is a special case. He not only concludes that v33b goes with v33a, but that vv34-35 should be removed from holy writ all together! He claims that vv34-35 are so contradictory and so extraordinarily un-Pauline that they were clearly inserted by someone else. He does not discuss them in his commentary, nor does he even include them in his outline of the letter.

As tempting as it is to declare one's agreement with Fee's position and simply not bother with the passage that begins, "The women are to keep silent in the church...", we will not be doing that. Those two verses are in the canon, so we will be giving them their due attention. I believe it is possible to harmonize these two verses with so-called contradictory passages such as v11:5, which speaks of women praying and prophesying.

But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved.

My conclusion regarding the correct punctuation—whether v33b belongs with v33a or v34—is to not be dogmatic. Neither option is heresy; both can be applied to the church:

- The call for peace and order instead of confusion and chaos is indeed applicable to *all* the churches; and
- If it is right and orderly for women to keep silent in all the churches, it is right and orderly for the church in Corinth.

We will be continuing this discussion in our next session.