1 Corinthians 14:20–40

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men. In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe. If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth.

How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation: let all things be done unto edifying. If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course, and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints. Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them

> *to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church. What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant. Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order.*

Spirit, Soul, and Body — Man's Tripartite Nature

Before taking up the next section of the chapter, the passage prompts a brief consideration of man's constitution. Scripture speaks of man as spirit, soul, and body — what is called in theological parlance trichotomy. Some hold that spirit and soul are merely two aspects of the same thing, but the distinction is clearly maintained in Scripture. Hebrews 4:12 declares that the word of God is able to discern between the two, and 1 Thessalonians 5:23 distinguishes all three: *your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless.* God does not speak in mere redundancy.

The spirit is the rational, God-connected faculty — the candle of the Lord, searching the inward parts. It is in the spirit that a man prays, as our passage shows. The soul is the seat of the affections, the will, and the responsible self before God — *the soul that sinneth, it shall die.* It is the seat of both the old and new natures, and where the will resides. The body is the vehicle through which both express themselves in this world. In the resurrection, the body will be a spiritual body — not that it will cease to be a body, but that the spirit will have the characterising pre-eminence in the man, rather than the soul with its entanglement of earthly emotion. If that is the character of worship in glory, it instructs us as to the character of worship here: spiritual, intelligent, and not

merely a worked-up emotional intensity.

Tongues — A Sign for Unbelievers

Verse 21 cites Isaiah 28:11–12: *With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people, and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord.* God had used the Assyrian invaders — speaking an unknown tongue — as a sign of judgment upon unbelieving Israel. The strange language was the mark of God's governmental dealings with a people who had refused to hear Him in their own.

Verse 22 draws the application: tongues are a sign not to believers but to unbelievers. Prophesying, conversely, serves not the unbeliever but those who believe. The two gifts have different primary spheres. Tongues, when they function as a sign, are a witness to unbelievers that God is at work — as on the day of Pentecost, where men from every nation heard the wonderful works of God declared in their own language. But in the assembly meeting, if all are speaking in tongues and an unbeliever or an unlearned person enters, his reaction will be: *ye are mad.* The sign that was meant to reach him has become an obstacle. Whereas if all prophesy, and the same person enters, he is convicted, judged, the secrets of his heart are made manifest, and he falls down on his face and worships God, reporting that God is truly among them.

When Ye Come Together — Order in the Assembly

Verse 26 describes what a meeting of the assembly is like: *every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation.* This is not a meeting controlled by one speaker with a prepared address. Every member potentially has something — the assembly in its gathering to the name of the Lord Jesus, with the Spirit present, gives expression to a variety of contributions from different members of the body. But the governing principle is

stated at once: *let all things be done unto edifying.*

The order for tongues is explicit: two, or at the most three, each in turn, and there must be an interpreter. If there is no interpreter, let the tongue-speaker keep silence in the church — let him speak to himself and to God. The limit of three is a restraining hand laid upon the gift the apostle is putting second. For prophets, the wording is slightly different: *let the prophets speak two or three.* Not *at the most* three, as with tongues — the priority given to prophecy shows even in the phrasing. And the others are to judge what is spoken.

The Spirits of the Prophets Are Subject to the Prophets

Verse 32 states a governing principle for the whole chapter: *the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.* This is the direct counter-principle to what the Corinthians had been accustomed to seeing in the idol temples of their city, where those under a demon's influence could not control themselves. The spirit of a prophet — that rational, God-connected faculty — is subject to the prophet himself. He is not swept away; he retains full self-control. If another receives a revelation while the first is speaking, the first holds his peace — he can stop, because his spirit is subject to him. This is not the impulse and power of a demon. Self-control is of the essence of Christian ministry.

The reason is given in verse 33: *God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.* What characterised those Corinthian meetings — or at least the disorder that had been allowed to develop — was confusion. What God gives is peace. The same Lord who gave the gifts gave this chapter to regulate them, and the regulation is not in conflict with the gifts but in perfect harmony with them. The Spirit of power and the Spirit of a sound mind are the same Spirit.

The Commandments of the Lord

Verse 37 is one of the most pointed in the chapter: *if any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.* The apostle anticipates that some who claimed to be prophets or spiritual would resist what this chapter lays down. His answer is direct: whoever is truly spiritual will recognise that these are the Lord's commandments. Whoever refuses to acknowledge that has disqualified his own claim to be spiritual. There is nothing left to say to such a one.

William Kelly observed that the closing verse — *let all things be done decently and in order* — is cited in Christendom for every kind of order except the one that is actually in this chapter. The order being laid down is the order of verses 26 through 40 — the free operation of the Spirit in the assembly, with the gifts given by the ascended Head, regulated by love and sound mind. That is the order to which the verse refers. When it is used instead to justify a clergyman presiding over a passive congregation, it is being used for precisely the order it does not have in view.

Covet to Prophesy — Forbid Not to Speak with Tongues

The closing instruction of verse 39 maintains the balance: *covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.* The apostle does not forbid tongues. He regulates them; he puts prophesying before them; he requires interpretation; he limits the number. But he does not forbid. Both gifts were genuine, both were given by the Spirit, both had their place. The regulation is not a suppression.

The chapter is a model of how Scripture handles the tension between spiritual reality and orderly expression of it. The Spirit is sovereign; the gifts are real; the assembly is the sphere of their exercise; love and sound mind govern their use. None of these things is in conflict with the others. They form together the picture of what the assembly of God in its gathering to the name of the Lord Jesus is

meant to be: a place where God is the object, edification is the aim, and the Spirit operates in freedom within the order He himself has given.

— Study ends —