

1 Corinthians 14:26–33

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

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.

How Is It Then — A State Described

Verse 26 appears to describe what was actually happening among the Corinthians rather than what should happen — every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. The tone is one of gentle rebuke: they came to the meeting each already full of what they intended to contribute, already wound up to give it out. The word *hath* carries the sense of arriving with it prepared. There is a discomfort in the picture of an alleged revelation prepared in advance, and of a tongue and its interpretation being brought separately rather than as the complementary pair they were meant to be.

The order in the list is itself instructive — tongue and interpretation are separated by revelation. In a meeting governed by the Spirit, those two gifts would function together. Pulled apart for the sake of individual display, each could be made a vehicle for self-promotion independently of the other. And yet the apostle does not introduce a liturgy or a fixed programme as the remedy. He does not say: arrange things in advance so there is no disorder. He simply says: *let all things be done unto edifying*. The remedy is souls put right, not a system imposed.

Ten Lets — And What They Mean

These closing verses of chapter 14 are notable for the word *let*. There are some ten occurrences of it in the passage. It is a characteristically Christian word. If Moses had written this verse, it would have read, *thou shalt edify*. Instead: *let all things be done unto edifying*. The word *let* invites and permits — it puts responsibility on the conscience of the saint, rather than imposing a command from outside. It supposes a willing heart, responsive to the Lord's known mind.

Yet these lets are not optional in the sense that the flesh can use their form as a loophole. Verse 37 will make plain that the things the apostle writes are the commandments of the Lord. The *let* is not a lesser authority — it is a higher appeal, addressed to those who love the Lord and desire to honour Him. It is the language of grace, not license.

If Any Man Speak in a Tongue — Two or at the Most Three

The regulation of tongues begins with the word *if* — not *let*. That is deliberate. The apostle is cooling tongues down while lifting prophesying up. Verse 27 says: if any man speak in a tongue, let it be by two, or at the most three, and that separately, and let one interpret. Verse 29 says: let the prophets speak two or three. No *at the most* appears for the prophets. The wording throughout comports with the truth already established in chapter 13 — that tongues shall cease of

their own accord, while prophesying shall be done away only when the perfection of glory comes. The apostle writes consistently with that.

Two things are fixed by verse 27. First, the speaking in tongues must be done separately — one at a time, not simultaneously. The disorder at Corinth apparently included speaking at the same time. Second, there must be an interpreter present. If there is no interpreter, the tongue-speaker is to keep silence in the church and speak to himself and to God. God does not raise up an interpreter for the occasion — the interpreter is a person known to have the gift, just as the tongue-speaker is known to have the gift. There is no provision in this passage for gifts that pop up momentarily and then disappear. This is ministry by gift, as established in chapter 12.

Let the Prophets Speak Two or Three — Let the Others Judge

For prophets, the order is: let two or three speak, and let the others judge. If something is revealed to another who sits by, let the first hold his peace. The principle of speaking one by one, separately, that was established for tongue-speakers, flows through to the prophets. The Spirit of God is consistent.

The instruction to let the first hold his peace when another receives a revelation does not mean the first is to be cut off mid-sentence. It means that when one prophet has completed what he has been given to say, and the next one has received something to bring before the assembly, the first sits down — he brings his ministry to a close. This is in keeping with the order of separately and with the governing principle of verse 40: let all things be done becomingly and in order. To interrupt a brother in the middle of ministry is not consonant with that order.

And let the others judge. The word *others* is plural, and it is not restricted to other prophets. The responsibility of the hearers is real. Judgment here means discernment: is this the word of God? Is this from the Spirit, or from the flesh?

That calls for an uprightness of heart, even when what is heard smites one's own conscience. Indeed, that the ministry does smite the conscience may itself be one of the marks that it is of God. A steady stream of ministry that never addresses the state, never disturbs the soul, is worth questioning.

Spirits of the Prophets Are Subject to the Prophets

Verse 32 states the governing principle of all that has been said: *the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets*. This stands in deliberate contrast to what the Corinthians had seen in the idol temples of their city — devotees acting under the impulse and power of a demon, unable to control themselves, swept along by a power that had taken possession of them. Someone under such influence could say: the spirit made me do it. That is never how the Spirit of God operates in the assembly.

The prophet is fully accountable for what he says, when he says it, and when he stops. He cannot attribute disorder to the Spirit of God. His own spirit — the rational, God-connected faculty of the man — is subject to himself. Self-control is not a hindrance to prophesying; it is a mark of it. And the same principle applies through the whole chapter — to the tongue-speaker who must keep silent if there is no interpreter, to the prophet who gives way when another receives a revelation. The flesh says the spirit made me do it; the Spirit of God says the spirit is subject to the prophet.

God Is Not the Author of Confusion, But of Peace

Verse 33 gives the reason for all the order that has been laid down: *God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints*. This is not a principle local to Corinth. It is the character of God expressed in the ordering of every assembly of His people. What He is in Himself — not an author of confusion — is reflected in what He desires for all His gathered saints.

Darby notes in his translation that the phrase could also read: *he is not the God of disorder*. In a city like Corinth, with its abundance of false gods and idol temples, there may even have been a god of disorder to whose shrine the devotees of chaos could repair. But the one true God is not that. He is a God of peace. And that peace — not the emotional excitement of fleshly religion, not the worked-up frenzy of the charismatic, but the deep peace of the Spirit working in order — is what characterises the assembly gathered to the Lord's name.

— *Study ends* —