

Decently and in Order (1 Cor. 14:26–40)

By Jacob Gerber

In 1 Corinthians 14:26–40, Paul seeks to apply everything that he wrote in the first half. Paul makes this intention clear by the transitional phrase, “What then, brothers?” (v. 26a). For this reason, Paul’s instructions in the second half of 1 Corinthians 14 are far more practical than the doctrinal instruction Paul gave in the first half of the chapter. Even so, applying these practical instructions to our own worship today is a complicated task for at least two reasons.

First, while Paul offers a number of instructions about public worship, he clearly does not offer a comprehensive set of instructions about public worship. This is evident from the fact that Paul begins his practical instructions with the phrase, “When you come together...” (v. 26b). Earlier, Paul used the same word for “come together” five times in 1 Corinthians 11 to write about the church’s “coming together” for the purpose of celebrating the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34). Here, Paul does not even mention the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, which demonstrates that the instructions Paul gives are selective, not exhaustive. Along these lines, we might also note that Paul’s instructions are clearly bound up in the specific critiques for Corinth’s worship, especially where tongues were given primacy over prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1–25) and women were attempting to take the roles and appearances of men in worship (1 Cor. 11:2–16).

Second, Paul is giving instructions for the worship of a church in the age of the apostles, before the completion of the New Testament. After the deaths of the apostles, the spiritual gifts (*pneumatika*; cf. 1 Cor. 12:1; 14:1) related to prophecy, tongues, and knowledge ceased. Thus, we cannot adhere to the details of what Paul commands here, just as we cannot adhere to the details for worship commanded in the Old Testament book of Leviticus.

This does not mean, however, that these instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 are of no value for us. On the contrary, these instructions are of great value, but we discover their practical value in the same *way* that the glean practical value from the book of Leviticus. Specifically, we must separate the specific, immediate *issues* of this passage from the general *principles* that are timeless for the worship of God’s people. While the specific issues will always change in the churches of Christ, the general principles remain the same. In this passage, we see two general principles that we must apply to our worship. Overall, the principles from this passage teach us that *in public worship, order builds up the church*.

The Elements as Worship (1 Cor. 14:26)

The first general principle from this passage addresses *what* we ought to do in our worship. Specifically, Paul is teaching that the prophetic word of God must occupy a place of prominence in our worship. Observe carefully the list of the *elements* of worship that Paul provides in v. 26: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.” Each

of these elements for the *content* of their worship bring the word of God to people in various forms—by singing, teaching, or speaking. The substantive content of our worship cannot be whatever we want it to be, as Paul has proven decisively by arguing extensively against *untranslated* tongues in worship in the first half of this chapter. Only the prophetic word of God can build up, encourage, and console God’s people (1 Cor. 14:3). So, tongues are permissible in worship, but only if someone can interpret what is spoken (v. 28).

Now, the rest of the New Testament—and, indeed, other parts of 1 Corinthians—prescribe other substantive elements of what should take place when the church “comes together” for public worship. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul describes not only prophecy, but also *prayer*, as proper for the men leading public worship, with heads uncovered (1 Cor. 11:4, 7). Indeed, earlier in this chapter, Paul insisted that the public prayers must be made in such a way that the outsider can say “Amen” by understanding what is being prayed (1 Cor. 14:16). In addition, as we observed above, Paul uses the word for “come together” five times to describe the administration of the *sacrament* of the Lord’s Supper in the public worship of the church. The word, sacraments, and prayer, then, are the only *substantive elements* of worship God has commanded us to use in our public worship. As question #88 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.”

The Order for Worship (1 Cor. 14:26, 40)

If the first general principle dealt with *what* we should do in worship, the second general principle of this passage deals with *how* we should do what we do in worship. Specifically, Paul teaches that *order* in worship is essential for *building up* the church—and, by extension, as an essential requirement for fulfilling the mandate of *love*.¹ To see how Paul articulates this principle, we need to observe the sheer number of commands Paul gives in this passage, a detail that is sometimes obscured in our English translations. What makes it so difficult to translate Paul’s commands (in Greek, the *imperative* mood) is that these are not *second-person* commands, but *third-person* commands. We regularly employ second-person imperatives in English. We find a good example of second-person imperatives in v. 39: “So, my brothers, *earnestly desire* to prophesy, and *do not forbid* speaking in tongues.” With second-person imperatives, we are commanding another person (or group of people) to do something *directly*. In Greek, however, there is also a clear way to give a command to someone in the third person. English has many ways of expressing this kind of thought, but there is no way to express an indirect command that clearly lines up with the Greek third-person imperative. So, the English Standard Version sometimes translates the phrase with the word “let...”: i.e., “*Let all things be done* for building up” (v. 26; cf. v. 27, 28 (x2), 29 (x2), 30, 35). Other times, the English Standard Version uses phrases with the word “should...”: i.e., “...the women *should keep silent* in the churches...but they *should be in submission*, as the Law also says” (v. 34; cf. v. 37, 40). Both “let” and “should” translate these third-person imperatives as well as it is possible to do, given the limitations of the English language. It may have been better, however, to translate these phrases consistently through this passage in order to give a better sense of the consistency of Paul’s language.

¹ Thiselton, *First Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary*, 246.

In all, Paul gives twelve of these third-person, imperative commands in this passage. Ten of those third-person imperatives concern specific classes of people: those who speak in tongues, those who prophesy, those who are “spiritual” (v. 37), or women. The first and final imperatives, however, frame the first general principle for public worship that Paul gives us in this passage. In these two imperatives, Paul instructs us about how *all* things should be done: “Let all things be done for building up” (v. 26) and “all things should be done decently and in order” (v. 40). Everything Paul writes between these two commands, then, are merely specific applications of these general, universal principles of how “all things” ought to be done in worship. In fact, we may also observe that these two principles really summarize everything Paul has stated about the use of spiritual gifts in worship in this whole section of Paul’s Letter, from 1 Corinthians 12–14.

Substantive Content vs. Circumstantial Order

This primary value of this passage, then, is to provide us a model of how to navigate the relationship between *what* we do in worship and the details of *how* we do “all things decently and in order.” It is important to see how the Bible acknowledges the *substantive elements* of worship (*what* we do to worship God) to be inviolable and sacrosanct, while Paul here speaks of the *order* in our worship (*how* we use these elements to worship God) as flexible and guided by general principles rather than any fixed rule. Historically, the *order* concerning worship has been classified as the *circumstances* of our worship, which are carefully distinguished from the *substantive elements* of our worship. The Westminster Confession of Faith cites 1 Corinthians 14:26, 40 (Paul’s two commands about how “all things” should be done) as the prooftexts for the final statement about *circumstances* in the final sentence of this paragraph:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. **Nevertheless, we acknowledge** the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and **that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.** (WCF 1.6)

On the one hand, when it comes to the *substantive elements* of worship, the whole counsel of God contains “all things necessary” for us to know. Beyond these substantive elements of worship that God has explicitly commanded, the Church dare not add anything else to our worship: “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship.”² God alone regulates the substance and content of our worship.

On the other hand, when it comes to the *circumstances concerning the worship of God*, then we

² Westminster Confession of Faith, 20.2.

must consider the light of nature, Christian prudence, and the general rules of the Word. In regard to these *circumstances*, this passage demonstrates the role of the Church to regulate the order and structure of *how* we worship the Lord. Here is how the Westminster Confession of Faith articulates this principle:

It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; **to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God**, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: **which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word.** (WCF 31.2)

These “rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God” would include any (circumstantial) details such as how many should speak, how long they should speak, and the order of when each speaker will lead in public worship. In 1 Corinthians 14:26–40, Paul does not raise any questions about *what* should happen in worship (v. 26), but only about the order of *how* it will happen.

Importantly, we should also notice from Westminster Confession of Faith, 31.2, that God does not leave decisions about the circumstantial details of our worship to individual Christians. Biblically, Paul makes this point clear when he speaks of order that must be imposed upon the various worshipers who come with their hymns, lessons, revelations, tongues, or interpretations. Specifically, it is *the elders* of the church who establish the rule of Christ’s reign in the church (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1; 5:17). It is *the elders* of the church who have charge to make sure that all things are done “decently and in order.” Theologians call this the “power of order,” or the “diatactical power” (from the Greek words *διά*, *dia*, “through”; and *τάξις*, *taxis*, “order”; v. 40) of the church.³ This power is not a *legislative* power to decree new laws, but only a *ministerial* and *declarative* power to apply and administer what God has commanded in his Word. G. I. Williamson stresses this point in his

³ There is the ‘*potestas διατακτικη*,’ the power belonging to the Church in the way of administering ordinances and government in the Christian society. This power comprehends the right to carry into effect the institutions and laws which Christ has appointed within the Church: it does not involve the power to bind the conscience or obedience of its members to the observance of new or additional ordinances, enacted by itself. In regard to ordinances, the authority of the Church in the dispensation of them is purely administrative; the Church communicating to them no authority and no virtue from itself, but dispensing them solely as the appointed channels through which the Spirit of God conveys a spiritual influence to those who use them in faith, and not as charms to which the Church has imparted grace of its own. In regard to laws, the authority of the Church is no more than declaratory, and can neither enforce the obedience nor punish the transgression of them by any other than the authority wherewith Christ has made them binding, or the censures wherewith Christ has given sanction to their hold on the conscience.” (James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (First published 1869; Reprinted by the Banner of Truth Trust: 1960, 1974; Revised Reprint Ed. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 237.)

commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith:

It is important to stress the fact that the power in evidence here is strictly limited. It is limited to the *declaration* of that which God has said in his Word and the proper *order by which* the commands of God are to be observed. For example, it would be proper for a synod to make rules concerning the *order* of worship to be observed in a church where difficulty has arisen over such a question. But it would not be permissible to make new laws additional to the Bible as to the proper elements of divine worship. No synod may lawfully legislate the *content* of true worship. It can only decree with respect to the *order* of worship.⁴

Christ alone regulates the *content* of his worship, but he delegates to the officers of his church the authority to regulate the *order* of how that biblically-regulated worship should be carried out.

We should observe the way that Paul entrusts this power to the elders of the Corinthian Church in v. 36–40. First, Paul rejects the idea that this power permits the Corinthian Church to do anything they please: “Or was it from you [plural] that the word of God came? Or are you [plural] the only ones it has reached?” (v. 36). No single congregation is on an island, making these directions, decrees, and determinations for themselves alone. They are connected to the wider body of Christ, so that their intent should be to conform to the *catholic* (i.e., universal) practices of the church.⁵

Second, Paul critiques individuals who refuse to submit themselves under the authority of the Church in regard to these circumstantial matters: “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. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (1 Cor. 14:37–38). The general principles come by the command of the Lord, so that the *ministerial application* of those principles by the elders of the church are the outworking of the command of the Lord. This is why the Westminster Confession of Faith (quoted above) insists that such “decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word.” Again, G. I. Williamson is helpful on this point:

If the decrees and determinations of church assemblies are “consonant to the Word of God,” they are to be “received with reverence and submission.” This is true not only because these decrees are scriptural (although that is of primary importance), but also because these decrees are made by a church government instituted by Christ. There is authority not only in Scripture, which is declared, but also in the synod which declares. For example, if a synod

⁴ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith For Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 322.

⁵ We should distinguish the word *catholic* (from the Greek words καθ’ ὅλος, *kath’ holos*, “from the whole,” meaning “universal”) from the Roman Catholic Church. True catholicity was perhaps best summarized by Vincent of Lérins (d. 445 AD): “that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.” On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church claims to be the universal church, but, on the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church also insists on the primacy of the Roman church in particular. Ultimately, the Roman idiosyncrasies of that church corrupt her claim to *catholicity*.

decrees that the Lord's Supper be observed at least four times every year, this ought to be done not only because Christ has commanded the frequent observance of the sacrament in the Bible, but also because an assembly of Christ's Church has decreed a particular order, lawfully, in his Church. To disregard a particular order which is agreeable to the Word of God, is sinful not only because of the general command which the order implements, but also because of the specific command by which it is implemented. To disregard a specific decree which implements a general command of Christ is sinful because Christ has authorized church courts to make such decrees.⁶

Elders of the church are to determine *how* God's biblically-regulated worship will be carried out. If an individual Christian refuses to submit to these biblically-consonant decrees and determinations for the circumstantial order concerning worship, he is not merely rejecting the authority of the elders. Ultimately, that person is rejecting the authority of Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What do we mean when we talk about the *elements* of public worship? How are the list of elements of public worship in 1 Corinthians 14:26 similar to the elements of public worship that we employ today? How are they different? Which other biblically-commanded elements does Paul leave out of the list in v. 26? Where do we find biblical support for those other elements? Why does God want his own word to take center stage in our worship? Why should we limit our worship to only the elements that God explicitly commands in his worship?
2. What do we mean when we talk about the *circumstances* of public worship? What examples can you give about the kinds of decisions for worship that would be about circumstances, rather than elements? How much information does the Bible give us to guide those decisions in the church (WCF 1.6)? Why is it important to keep in mind that questions about elements are *biblical faithfulness* questions, while the circumstances of worship are only *wisdom* questions? To whom do the Scriptures give the authority for making decisions about the circumstances of worship? Why?

⁶ Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith For Study Classes*, 322–23.