

# The Dialogue of Worship (1 Cor. 14:26–40)

*By Jacob Gerber*

Last week, we considered the distinction between the *elements* of worship and the *circumstances* of worship. In the elements that we offer *as* worship, we must use only what God has explicitly commanded, and nothing else. For the circumstances concerning worship, however, God has not given explicit instructions, but only general principles in the Bible. So, we must seek to do all things for building up, through decent and orderly worship (1 Cor. 14:26, 40).

## Our Dialogue with God in Worship

With this basic distinction between the fixed elements of worship on one side, and the flexible circumstances concerning worship on the other side, let us now consider the specific instructions Paul gives to the Corinthians for public worship. A close reading of this passage helps to recognize that decisions about circumstances are not entirely flexible. As Paul discusses a number of circumstantial issues concerning public worship at Corinth, he reflects a key principle that remains true for our own worship today: *worship is a dialogue between God and his people*.

As churches seek to give order to their worship, there may be some variation from church to church; however, Paul organizes everything he says in this passage around an inviolable principle that *worship is a dialogue between God and us*. Worship is an activity where God speaks to us in his word and sacraments, and we speak back to God by prayer and singing praises. Although some of the specific forms of God’s speech may have looked different in the earliest church than they do today, the general principle remains the same.<sup>1</sup>

## Our Submissive Silence in Worship

In addition to the principle that worship is a dialogue, Paul adds a corresponding principle that must guide our worship: *We participate in worship not by self-promoting speech, but by submissive silence*. While Paul focused the first half of the chapter on what kind of speech should take place (clear,

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<sup>1</sup> For the rest of this section, I am deeply dependent on insights contained in the “Report of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church,” a report presented to the fifty-eighth (1991) General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. All three individual reports contained in the overall report are well worth reading. The details of the recommendations offered in the three reports differ, but each report brings out a different set of preliminary principles that are critical for rightly understanding new covenant worship. In particular, I find “Minority Report #2” by Kenneth J. Campbell persuasive, and I am drawing heavily on his exegesis here. <<https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html>> Accessed September 28, 2020.

intelligible prophecy, rather than incomprehensible, unintelligible foreign tongues), now Paul talks about the significance of *silence* in the congregation. Paul teaches this explicitly through three commands about who should keep silent, and when (v. 28, 30, 34).

Those commands are not the only places where Paul urges silence, however. Notice also that Paul places clear limitations on the *number* of speakers, along with the requirements that the speakers take turns speaking, “one by one” (v. 27, 29a, 30–31). So, when someone else is speaking, everyone else should be silent. The biblical emphasis for public worship is not that we should provide ample space for every person to speak, but to take care so that God’s word is not distorted by an endless parade of speakers wanting to offer their own thoughts, or by the clamor of people trying to speak over one another. When someone is speaking God’s word to the congregation, all others should be silent.

It is in this connection that we can understand why Paul also adds a limitation on the speakers *themselves*, restricting individual speech in public worship to qualified, gifted men only. Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 that God has given men the responsibility for openly and visibly declaring God’s word in public, and that their appearance without a head covering should reinforce this activity. For this reason, Paul insisted that women should neither take up the activity of men (public prophesying and praying), nor the appearance of men (without a head covering) in public worship. Here in v. 33b–35, Paul is saying the same thing: in public worship, women should remain silent throughout. If, however, all the rest of the congregation must remain silent when any one (man) is speaking God’s word to the congregation, this does not represent an overly burdensome restriction. Women are not *excluded* from worship—they simply join *all* others in the congregation who listen silently when any *one* (man) is speaking God’s word to the congregation.

Finally, we should notice Paul’s multiple emphases on the importance of an attitude of submissiveness from worshippers. Let’s consider these instructions from the broadest to the narrowest scope. First, and most broadly, Paul addresses the church in Corinth as a whole. So, Paul teaches that each individual *church* should submissively conform their practices to what is done “in all the churches of the saints” (v. 33b). Then, Paul rebukes any congregation who arrogantly acts as though the word of God came from them, or reached them alone (v. 36). Second, Paul addresses the leaders in the church. To those who would speak in tongues, Paul insists that they must submissively refrain from speaking publicly if there is no one to interpret (v. 28). To the prophets, Paul insists that each prophet should submit to the judgment of the other prophets who will weigh what the first speaks (v. 29), so that “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets” (v. 32). Furthermore, Paul says that one prophet should keep silent if a revelation is made to another prophet sitting there (v. 31). Third, Paul addresses the women in the congregation, reminding them that they should “be in submission, as the Law also says” (v. 34). We should note that the word for “submission” (ὑποτασσέσθωσαν, *hupotassesthōsan*) here is the same verb Paul uses to describe the subjection of the spirits of prophets to the prophets (ὑποτάσσεται, *hupotassetai*; v. 32). Fourth, Paul insists that each individual must submit to Paul’s instructions as “a command of the Lord” (v. 37), so that if “anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (v. 38).

In our culture, the instructions for women to submit silently in public worship becomes such a lightning rod of controversy that it distracts our attention from the context of the rest of the passage. Yes, women should worship in silent submission in church, *but so must everyone else* who is not speaking God’s word at any given moment. Even men gifted in tongues or prophesy must be submissively silent when another man is speaking. All the rest of the congregation may speak together, with one voice, in the responsive readings, in prayers, and in singing.

## Our Participation in Worship

What value is there in silence, though? Kenneth Campbell offers a breathtaking defense of silence as the highest manner of worship, made possible only by the provisions of the new covenant:

Silence is indicative of the internalized character of worship. Worship in the age of covenantal fulfillment is in “spirit and in truth” (John 4:23–24). With the church’s baptism in the Spirit (Acts 2:33, I Corinthians 12:13) a new dimension and a new dynamic was added to the exercise of worship. The impersonal externalism of the old covenant worship was replaced, because of the redemptive accomplishments of Christ, with the personal intimacy of the internalized new covenant worship. With access to the throne of grace opened by the high priestly work of Christ (Hebrews 10:19–22) and with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 3:16–17), a new interaction with God through His Word has been made possible (I Corinthians 2:12–13). The silence of worship involves this very active interaction with God. As the voice of God is heard through the reading and the preaching of the Word or is seen through the elements of the sacraments, there is an expected internal consideration and response. The activity of worship is going on in silence in this meeting between God and His people. Indicative of this internalized worship are the words of I Corinthians 14:28, “but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God.” The context of these words is corporate worship....It is helpful to notice that Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 insofar as they are addressing worship (whether private or corporate) emphasize the internalized nature of worship. Even the outward form of worship, for instance singing, is of consequence only when it is from within, from the heart. The qualifications of these passages “making melody with your heart” and “with thankfulness in your hearts to God” demonstrate that the essence of worship is internal. Silence participates in this essence of worship just as much, if not more, than the audible expressions of worship.<sup>2</sup>

It is helpful to tease out the progress of worship in redemptive history a bit further. In the sacrifices, rites, and ceremonies of the law of Moses, the people experienced worship as something that was *external* and *impersonal*. They watched from afar the worship that the priests offered on their behalf—at least, they watched until the priest disappeared into the tabernacle or temple to finish the rest of the ceremonies prescribed for worship, completely out of the view of the common people.

Nevertheless, while the sacrificial system remained in place until Christ offered himself up as a once-for-all sacrifice for his people, G. Duncan Lowe observes that, during that period of time, the compilation of the Psalms of David represented a major step forward in the history of the worship of God’s people toward a much more *internal* and *personal* experience:

The nature of the change is that the relatively impersonal system of law and worship that God had previously established through Moses now becomes something with a definite

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth J. Campbell, “Minority Report #2 of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church,” §C.4.b. <<https://opc.org/GA/unordained.html>> Accessed September 28, 2020.

personal character through David. This is a progress in God's grace. God is becoming more and more personally recognizable among his people through His chosen representative. This progress is nowhere near complete in David, but it does indicate the kind of fulfillment that would eventually be accomplished in the person of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

With the writing of the Psalms, worshipers were given words to guide their own *personal* worship. Worship was becoming less of something the priest did for them, and more of something that they could do *internally*, from their hearts. This trajectory finds its fulfillment in the submissive silence of new covenant worshipers during public worship as they give careful attention to the word of God in spirit and in truth.

### Why Silence? For our Good, and for God's Glory

Paul is not recommending submissive silence in worship arbitrarily. Rather, he roots these recommendations for the circumstances concerning worship in two values, which were summarized in the first and last command given in this passage. First, we submissive silence allows “all things [to be] done for building up” (v. 26). In v. 31, Paul insists that even the prophets must prophesy one by one, “so that all may learn and all be encouraged.” The word for “learn” (μανθάνωσιν, *manthanōsin*) is the verb from which we get the noun “disciple” (μαθητής, *mathētēs*), which means “learner.” Then, the word for “encouraged” (παρακαλῶνται, *parakalōntai*) is a word Paul used earlier in v. 3 about the benefits of prophesy. This word can refer to two kinds of “encouragement,” either the encouragement of exhortation, or of comfort. Worship builds up as people *learn* the word of God, in order to be *exhorted* to believe it and obey it, and to be *comforted* by its promises.

Second, Paul insists that submissive silence allows worship to be “done decently and in order” (v. 40). The reason for doing things decently and in order is partially to build up the church, but ultimately to reflect accurately the character of God: “For God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (v. 33). When everyone is clamoring to speak individually, talking over one another, and when those whom God has not qualified and gifted to deliver his speech to the public congregation, then we dishonor God by suggesting that he is a God of confusion. When we worship decently and in order, however, we honor and glorify the God of peace.

The world chafes at this passage of Scripture because the world understands the act of speaking as power, and the act of silence as oppression. The word of God reframes this teaching for us away from notions of human power into the proper framework of divine authority. The question is not, “How do we let everyone do everything, whenever they want, so that everyone has equal privileges?” The question is rather, “How has God called us to administer his authority, and how do we all submit to that authority?” Or, to adhere more closely to the language of this passage, “How has God instructed us to build up the church in worship in a way that glorifies him as the God of peace?”

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<sup>3</sup> G. Duncan Lowe, “Understanding the Psalms as Christian Worship,” in *The Book of Psalms for Worship* (Pittsburg, PA: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2010), vi.

## Implications for Modern Worship

Let us close our discussion of 1 Corinthians 14 by listing out a few implications from these principles for our worship today, on the other side of the age of the apostles. *First*, all worship, but especially *public* worship, should be a dialogue between God and his people. This is why God's word must take center stage in our worship, so that we devote our worship to the action of listening carefully to the voice of God in worship. Then, this is why we must respond by speaking his word back to him in responsive readings, in prayer, and in singing. Worship is not whatever we want to make it; worship is a *dialogue* between God and his people.

*Second*, we must continue to limit leadership of the public reading, praying, and preaching of God's word to gifted and qualified men. In the age of the apostles, the *gifting* of leaders was clear according to whether they could speak prophetically or not. The *qualification* of leaders was determined as the other prophets weighed what every prophet spoke (v. 29), for the spirits of prophets are subject to other prophets who would compare what any given prophet was saying with the rest of what God had revealed in his word (cf. Deut. 18:20–22; 1 Thess. 5:20–21; 1 John 4:1). Today, this principle will ordinarily mean limiting worship leadership to those who have been officially recognized as gifted and qualified men by ordination and installation to the office of elder, and especially those who hold the office of *teaching* elders. In our denomination, the process toward ordination includes thorough training, evaluation, and examination by other elders in our local congregation's Session (for ruling elders) or in the wider, regional Presbytery (for pastors). We want to assess whether men aspiring to the office of elder are gifted to engage in the ministry of the word, whether they qualified by their conduct and their ability to teach pure biblical doctrine (1 Tim. 3:1–7).

The necessity for this thorough process of vetting elders who will lead us in worship is reflected in this passage. Namely, it is a serious thing to act as God's voice to God's people by declaring his word, since to do so is to establish the rule of Christ's reign in the congregation. Paul touches on these ideas when he writes, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). The ministry of the word—especially by preaching and teaching—is nothing less than *ruling* in Christ's church. The implication, of course, is that this *rule* may not be abused by binding the consciences of believers with human doctrines and commandments. Rather, to lead in public worship is to speak on behalf of *God* to the people by God's word, and to represent the people before God by leading the congregation in prayer.

*Third*, we must all fully participate in worship by *submissive silence*. Whenever we are not the single person speaking God's voice to the congregation at any given point in the worship service, we must submit ourselves silently to the word of God as our act of worship. Certainly, we must be active in mind and in spirit to listen to, consider, believe, and obey the word of God, but we should do so in silence. This is true at all times for women and for most men, but the exact same requirement is true even for elders whenever they are not acting as God's voice.<sup>4</sup> Just as the prophets had to be silent

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<sup>4</sup> "A women's individual voice is not to be raised audibly except when it is a part of the whole body speaking in harmony. But, it needs to be stressed that this is normally the case for every other participant—non-qualified men, children, inactive qualified men—excepting those qualified men who are officiating the worship. Almost all within a given body of corporate worship exercise the role of submissiveness and so silence

while another was speaking (v. 30–31), so elders must be submissively silent when another is reading, preaching, or teaching.

Speaking personally as a pastor who often does bear the responsibility to speak with God's voice by reading, preaching, and teaching God's word, I would note that I experience some of the greatest freedom in worship when I can be seated in the congregation and listen to someone else speak God's words to me. In those moments, I do not have the mental, emotional, and spiritual strain of trying to speak God's voice with clarity, but only the joy of simple, silent submission to the word of God. It is a joy to lead God's people in worship, but my greatest joy must always remain in my personal, silent, submission to God's word. Without the latter, I cannot properly do the former.

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you think about worship as a *dialogue* between God and his people? If not, how have you usually classified what we are doing when we gather for public worship? In what ways does it change our approach to worship when we recognize that worship is a conversation between God and us? How does that concept change our approach to God's word in worship?
2. How does this passage reflect the necessity of *submissive silence* for the early church in Corinth? How do we participate in worship when we engage in submissive silence in our own worship today, on the other side of the age of the apostles and the spiritual gifts? How does Kenneth Campbell justify his assertion that "Silence participates in this essence of worship just as much, if not more, than the audible expressions of worship"? Do you agree with this idea? Why or why not?
3. Why does this passage (and others) in the Bible point to the requirement for gifted, qualified men to worship leadership roles such as reading the Bible, preaching the Bible, leading in prayer, etc.? What questions do you have about this biblical requirement, especially in contrast with the values of our modern culture?

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in the sense explained." (Campbell, Minority Report #2 of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church," §D.c.(12).)