

My purpose in preaching this sermon is that we will learn to worship together peacefully, in deference to one another.

What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Worship peacefully by deferring to one another.

We can summarize what Paul says in this passage like this: “Worship peacefully together by deferring to one another.” There may well be other ways of summarizing the passage, but I believe this is faithful to Paul’s authorial intent. The “worship peacefully” part can be seen easily enough in several places: in verse thirty-two we read, “For God is not a God of disorder but a God of peace”; and again in verse forty, “Everything you do ought to be well-presented and orderly.” Paul advocates orderly worship, but let’s be careful to recognize that the kind of order that Paul is talking about is an order of peacefulness.

Ordered worship is peaceful worship. If we read this whole passage at once, we see quickly that verses thirty-three and forty are parallel conclusions. The fact is that God is not of disorder but of peace. Perhaps it seems odd that “peace” would be the opposite of “disorder.” The word that Paul uses for “disorder” is one that is often translated elsewhere as “revolt” or “rebellion.” That being the case, it makes good sense that “peace” would be its opposite. But we also need to be careful to understand what Paul means by “peace.” Peace is much more than an absence of conflict. We often talk about this from a Jewish perspective, noting that the Hebrew word “shalom” means something more like “a comprehensive health and wholeness in which life flourishes.” Yet this is certainly the case from a Greek and Roman perspective, too. The famous Pax Romana was an extended period of peace within the Roman empire in which the economy and culture of the empire flourished. Paul means this same kind of thing when he says that God is a God of peace: that his people, worshipping together *peacefully*, worship in such a manner that life flourishes.

The worship of God ought to mirror the character of God. Since God is a God of peace, then our worship of him ought to be peaceful. And since the peacefulness of God is what causes life to flourish in

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health and wholeness, then our peaceful worship of this peaceful God ought also to bring about a flourishing of life in health and wholeness.

So, how does Paul say that the Corinthians' worship can become peaceful?

Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers to worship together peacefully by deferring to one another. To "defer" means to put something off until a later date or time. When a payment is deferred, it is put off until a later date. The payment is still made; it just happens later. In a relationship context, we defer ourselves to one another when we put ourselves off until a later time, allowing others to go ahead of us. In the context of a worship gathering, this doesn't mean that some people are more important than others and deserve more time and recognition: it means that we reflect the character of the God whom we worship when we consistently aim to do what will be of greatest benefit for others instead of looking to our own interests first. This is peaceful worship.

Paul gives the Corinthians some guidelines to work from – some "ground rules" for their worship. First, he says, "Whenever you come together, each of you has something: a song, a teaching, a revelation, a message in a tongue, an interpretation ..." (v. 26). This is not an instruction from Paul. Paul does not say that every one of the Corinthians is *supposed* to have something to say when they gather for worship, only that they do. The instruction that Paul gives them is what comes next: "Everything must be done in a manner that builds others up" (v. 36).

So, if you want to come to church with a message to speak in tongues, that's great. Two – or at the most three – can share their messages in tongues, as long as someone interprets the messages so that everyone can understand. But if there is no interpreter – Paul seems to imply that the Corinthians know who among them is able to interpret – then they are to remain silent. In other words, the spiritual work of speaking in tongues should only be done when others are built up by it. No matter how convinced a person is that the message in tongues he has received really is a genuine message from God, he is to keep it to himself if there is no one to interpret that message. The one who speaks in tongues must defer to those who do not and only do what will be most helpful for others.

And if you have a prophecy to share – a message from God in a language that others understand – then two or three can prophesy and the others should discern. The work of prophecy is not more important than the work of discernment; and even those who prophesy must defer to others. And if someone is already prophesying when another receives a revelation, the first one should remain silent. I don't know that Paul means that the first one should break off mid-sentence as soon as anyone else wants to say something. What certainly is clear is that there is no point in having two people prophesying at the same time. Quite likely neither one of them will be heard, and that would be neither helpful nor peaceful. So even prophets ought to defer to others. The work of prophecy is no excuse to run roughshod over others, for "the spirit of prophets is under the control of prophets, and God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (v. 33).

Then we come to this sticky little bit about women being silent in the church. What does Paul mean by this? Let me give one interpretation of it – and a few reasons why I believe that this is a very good interpretation – and you can decide whether it seems reasonable. I believe that what Paul means is this: Wives, defer to your husbands in public worship.

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There are four reasons why I believe this is Paul's meaning. First, Paul has already set out in 11:2-16 the appropriate guidelines by which a woman may pray or prophesy in church; and there is no argument that at least the work of prophesy is a verbal contribution to the worship service for the benefit of all who are there: therefore, Paul cannot mean that women are prohibited from making any verbal contribution at all in the service. Paul has already said that women *are* permitted to pray and prophesy in public worship gatherings. Second, the word that is translated as "be in submission" (ὑποτάσσω, *hypotassō*) is the same word that Paul and Peter both use elsewhere to instruct wives to "be in submission" to their husbands (Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1). Certainly, the word is used in other contexts as well, but it just as certainly suits the context of an exhortation for wives to defer to their husbands. This leads directly to the third reason, which is that Paul next addresses the husband-wife relationship: "If a woman wants to learn, a woman should ask her own husband at home" (v. 35). I believe it is this act of questioning that Paul says is out of place in public worship. A wife should not question her husband in public. The word translated here as "ask" or "inquire" is, in other places, translated as "questioned" (Luke 23:9; John 18:19; Acts 5:27). Paul says that this kind of behaviour is shameful, and this is the fourth reason why I believe that Paul's point is that wives should defer to their husbands at church. This word "shameful" (αἰσχρός, *aischros*) is the same word Paul used in 11:6 to describe the effect of a woman praying or prophesying in public worship with her head uncovered. The word refers to something that is considered inappropriate by others in a given culture. In this ancient Greco-Roman culture, it was disgraceful – shameful – for a woman to question her husband in public. To do so was to show disrespect for the authority of men as heads of their own households. When we consider that Paul has already shown concern for the way that unbelievers and outsiders will perceive the Corinthian's public worship (14:23), this also makes sense – that the Corinthian believers should treat one another respectfully so as not to bring disgrace on the church. So, Paul writes, Wives, defer to your husbands.

The result of deferring to one another is that worship will be peaceful; not just absent of conflict, but fruitful and beneficial for the church.

"If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or a spiritual person, he ought to acknowledge that what I write is the Lord's command" (v. 37).

It doesn't seem to be exactly clear what Paul means by this. Is he referring to something specific that Jesus said that Paul and the Corinthians knew about but that has since been lost? That seems unlikely, though perhaps possible. Or does Paul mean this in a general way, that what Paul has written is certainly consistent with the teaching of Jesus? Or perhaps he means that what is written here about worshipping peacefully together is the same thing as Jesus' command to his disciples to love one another as he has loved them. Whatever the case is, Paul doesn't leave any room for argument. "If anyone is ignorant [of this], he will be ignored." Perhaps Paul is referring here to Jesus' words found in Matthew 7:22-23: "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

"So then, my brothers, seek to prophesy and do not forbid speaking in tongues, but everything must be done in a well-presented and orderly way" (vv. 39-40).

Everything must be done peacefully, in a kind of way by which everyone present will benefit from what is said. The Corinthians are to worship together peacefully by deferring to one another.

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Perhaps the Quakers are the most charismatic of us all.

As I've been reading through this during the week, I've found myself wondering if the Quakers might not be the most truly charismatic of us all. The Quakers, also known as The Religious Society of Friends, is a Protestant denomination that has its roots in seventeenth century England. The core belief that prompted the beginning of the Quaker movement was that all believers are equal before God and that all believers are instruments through whom the Spirit works and speaks. In working out this conviction, the earliest gatherings consisted of "unprogrammed worship" (also known as "waiting worship"). In an unprogrammed worship gathering, the worshipers gather together and wait. And as any one of the worshipers receives a message or song or prayer from God, he shares it with the church. And if, during the course of worship, no one receives any message at all from God, then nobody says anything. There are many Quaker congregations that practice "programmed worship," which is very much like our service here this morning, but some continue to practice "unprogrammed worship." What strikes me most about those congregations that practice "unprogrammed worship" is the set of guidelines by which the gathering is ordered.

There are certain rules that seem obvious for a gathering like this "unprogrammed worship": rules like "don't interrupt someone who is already speaking" and "allow time after someone has spoken for reflection and discernment." Some things, like the guidelines that Paul sets on in this passage, seem like common sense. They are concrete and behavioural principles for demonstrating the grace of God to others. In that sense, the Quakers are by their practice charismatic. Overruling any other particular guideline, however, are two common-sense rules for entering a worship gathering. The first is to "come with heart and mind prepared." If you knew that there was a chance that you would be expected to speak in a worship gathering, you would certainly want your heart and mind prepared. How does one prepare? By spending time in scripture and prayer during the week before the meeting; that's how. The second common guideline is this: that one should come with "neither a resolve to speak nor a determination to be silent."

Come with neither a resolve to speak nor a determination to be silent.

What would it look like for you and me to come to church with neither a resolve to speak nor a determination to remain silent? First, it would mean that neither you nor I think that we ourselves are the most important thing to happen during our gathering. If Paul were to sit down with each one of us and each one of the Corinthian saints, there would be something that he would say the same to each and every one of us: "This is not about you." To you who speaks in tongues all the time, "This is not about you." To you who prophesies weekly, "This is not about you." To you who spends significant time every week preparing biblical sermons, "This is not about you." To you who has prayed over, laboured over, and shed tears over a selection of songs for everyone to sing together, "This is not about you."

When we come into our worship gatherings with neither a resolve to speak nor a determination to remain silent, then we recognize that our gatherings are not focused on any one of us. And when we realize that our worship together is in no wise about me, then we are much more able to hear the voice of God speaking through others. When we enter a gathering with neither a resolve to speak nor a determination to be silent, then we are able to defer to others. It may be plain to see that my silence may be a deference to others: I am silent so that others may speak. But it's important to note that my speech may also be a deference to others. That burning in your spirit to share a message – whether you feel like you really understand it or not – may well be a message given to you for the sake of someone else here.

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IN such a case, your resolve to remain silent may well be more selfish than gracious. If we determine to come to church with something to say or in a resolve to be silent, then we predetermine the work of the Spirit of God. What ultimate arrogance!

Perhaps in our context what's most difficult about this is that we have a schedule for ministry; and when a person is that schedule, there's a certain burden to produce something meaningful on that day. But what if, having spent the week in prayer and scripture, having read and studied, having practiced and prepared, one arrives on Sunday morning and hears the Spirit say, "Stop; be silent." What does one think? That, having spent so much time working on this message, on this service, that I must present it now? How selfish!

Do we believe that the Spirit of God guides us and inspires us for the benefit and building up of others? And, just as importantly, do we believe that the Spirit of God guides and inspires others for our benefit? That's what scripture tells us happens; is our behaviour congruent with our knowledge and faith?

When we gather for worship with neither a resolve to speak nor a determination to remain silent, then we recognize that no one of us has any right to monopolize the gathering; and that every one of us is equally fitted by the Spirit of God to minister for the benefit and building up of others. I think that what is asked of all of us in this scripture is that we should prepare ourselves for worship. We should spend time in scripture and in prayer preparing ourselves for worship, so that when we gather together for worship and the Spirit asks us to wait and remain silent, then we wait and remain silent. And when the Spirit asks us to open our mouths and speak, then we are ready: we open our mouths and speak. And then all things are done for the building up of the church for the glory of Jesus Christ, our Lord.