
Exegesis

In this series we invite contributors to exegete a biblical text which is immediately relevant but differently understood by Evangelicals. Contributors are free to provide their own careful exegesis and interpretation and it should be understood that the journal does not necessarily endorse the interpretation and conclusions of individual writers.

Texts already handled in this regular series are 1 Corinthians 11:19 and 2 Thesalonians 2:1-12. Here the Rev. John Cook provides an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 14:26 in order to elucidate biblical principles relating to Christian congregational worship.

Exegesis: 3 Congregational Worship

John Cook

Though the New Testament records occasions of congregational worship it rarely provides information about its content. This verse then and its context are particularly important in the discussion as to the basic elements of a Christian church service. If we are concerned with biblical principles and precedents, as we endeavour to have services of worship approved by God, there are valuable lessons to be learnt here. Perhaps it is necessary to begin by insisting that the major concern in congregational worship ought to be the glory of God. Worship should be God-centred, as His people come together to know His presence and to respond to Him as He deserves and requests. There is a real danger that services are fashioned and arranged to please and satisfy human beings, e.g. they must be bright and attractive to the unconverted, lively and jolly so that young people will enjoy them; they must not be “deep” and require too much concentration of the mind. How often such views are aired as if self-evidently right. In this brief study we shall consider first The Ingredients of Christian Public Worship, second The Conduct of Worship, third Divinely Authorised Rule in Worship.

The Ingredients of Christian Public Worship

The apostle Paul mentions five explicitly.

Psalms: Though several commentators suggest that by ‘psalm’ here private compositions for use in musical praise are denoted, the most natural reference is to the Psalms of the Old Testament. Individual Christians had a particular psalm that they wished the whole congregation to sing. Elsewhere in the New Testament we find other terms which would have been more appropriate for such personal compositions, like song (Gk. *ode*) or simply praise (Gk. *epainos*). In Luke 20:42 and 24:44 the Lord Jesus uses the word Psalm in

reference to the book in the Old Testament, and so does Peter (Acts 1:20) and Paul (Acts 13:33). The other Pauline usage of Psalm in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 are also probably to be understood in this way. While it would be improper to argue for 'psalms only' from our text, it does indicate the propriety and normality of psalm singing in the congregational worship of the early Church. God was praised by the singing of scripture truth; the words written by men inspired of the Holy Spirit were the basis of this response.

Teaching: This denotes the explanation, exposition and application of some portion of revealed truth. At Corinth in the 6th decade A.D. this revealed truth would include, together with the Old Testament Scripture, some of the teaching of the Lord Jesus, and authoritative communications from His apostles. Obviously now that the Canon is complete, the storehouse from which Christian teaching is brought into the life of the Church is the Scripture alone.

Revelation: In distinction from teaching this must be fresh disclosure of some truth by means of the New Testament prophets referred to in verses 29-32. It may well have been largely predictive in its content, as the messages given by Agabus were (Acts 11:28 and 21:11). However much of the ministry of prophets was identical to that of teachers in the Church, "Speaking to men edification and encouragement and consolation" (14:3). The communication of God's word was designed for the benefit of men, as they understood its meaning and relevance to them. (This contrasts with tongue-speaking, 14:2.)

Tongues: The miraculous gift of speaking with tongues in which a man "Spoke with God mysteries by the spirit" (14:2). This would include both praise and prayer, directed to God, and though the tongue speaker received some edifying there was no congregational benefit (14:2,4,6). Tongue-speaking was a working of the Holy Spirit upon a person's vocal chords or voice production powers, while his understanding was unproductive (14:4).

Interpretation: This also was a supernatural gift granted to a Christian so that he could "interpret the tongue" for the whole congregation to understand and thus to be helped or edified in worship (14:13-17). This was an immediate working of the Holy Spirit as indicated in 12:11.

This is obviously not an exhaustive list and from other biblical texts two other regular ingredients must be added. The public reading of Holy Scripture and the offering of prayer to God (Nehemiah chs. 8 and 9). The practice of the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 4:16f) and of Paul (Acts 13:15f) are instructive here. The apostle Paul gives specific directions about prayer in the Church (1 Timothy 2:1-3,8) and mentions the reading of scripture (4:13 of the same epistle).

It is clear that the congregational worship of the New Testament Church was similar to the pattern observed in the Jewish synagogues. All the distinctive features of "Temple worship" had been fulfilled by our Lord's redemptive accomplishments, i.e. no more priestly ritual and offering of sacrifices upon an altar.

The Christian sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper were also

part of congregational worship, and have been mentioned earlier in this epistle (1:14-16; 11:17-34).

The Conduct of Worship

Besides describing its contents the apostle comments upon the conduct of the Corinthian Christians in their congregational meetings. The verse begins with a question rendered, "How is it then brethren?" in the AV, but the sense is probably that of disapproval: "Whatever then is going on brethren?". Certainly the command at its end implies this, "Let everything be done for the purpose of edifying". Presumably the command was necessary because of faults, and in fact it is amplified in the details of verses 27-35. There follows a more general criticism of the Corinthian practice as embodying a proud independent spirit (vv.36-38). Thus it is apparent that the apostle Paul does not portray the Corinthian conduct of worship as an example to be copied, rather as itself in need of correction. Rather surprisingly this point has been frequently missed, and today many commend rather free and spontaneous contributions to worship, without observing that they were criticised and amended by the apostle.

The following verses contain his corrections in three specific areas.

1. **Tongue speaking.** There is firstly a restriction on the number of those who should employ this gift in any one service of worship, two or three at the most. However, when there was no interpreter present in the congregation, the use of tongues was prohibited. This is an application of the general principle that all things should be done unto edifying (v.26c).

2. **Prophesying.** Here again there is a limitation on the number of the prophets who should speak at any one service, and a warning against interrupting another speaker (v.30). There will be due opportunity for each to bring their message from God, and the Spirit who reveals does not overthrow the prophet's self-control. Such regulation is aimed at securing the maximum profit for the whole congregation, "that all may learn and all may be encouraged" (v.31b).

Before moving on to his third topic the apostle insists that no confusion or disorder in worship can be attributed to God; on the contrary, God is the author of peace. This peace was a marked feature in the life of other Christian churches and they were not troubled by such anarchic disharmony. The word translated 'confusion' in the AV (Gk. *akatastasia*) describes, "The disorder and unsettlement due to personal self-assertions and rivalries" (R. St. John Parry). It most directly relates to the exuberance to 'have their say' which marked some of the Corinthian Christians (v.26) and reveals the typical fault among them of conceit. (Six uses of the verb *phusioo*, to puff up with pride, 1 Corinthians 4:6,18,19; 8:1; 13:4.)

3. **Women speaking in the church service.** It seems that some Christian women at Corinth failed to recognise that their new-found liberty in Christ coexisted with their distinctive role in the structure of the family and society (11:3-16). Obviously some disorder in worship was due to their individual contributions, and the apostle totally bans all such. "Women must remain silent in the

churches. They are not permitted to speak but must be submissive according to what the law says.” The practice of women speaking in the Church is further banned in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and is here denounced as shameful, disgraceful, that is, offensive to God. The extent of this ban on a woman’s individual and vocal contribution to church worship most naturally relates particularly to the divinely appointed services of the Christian sabbath, the Lord’s Day.

Divinely Authorised Rule in Worship

The preceding section has indicated that there was some lack of authoritative guidance and discipline in the Corinthian worship services, which Paul here provides. There was not to be a ‘free for all’ when anyone could make their voices and opinions heard, rather should there be submission to the rule of God. Objectively this was located in the total body of revealed truth, which is now for us in the whole Bible. However, there is still required the application of this rule to particular congregations, and it is asked, “Who applies the rules?” We expect that this has also been made plain in Scripture, and so it has; for God has appointed elders to rule in His Church and churches. In this epistle (4:17; 7:17; 11:16) as now in this 14th chapter, the apostle has referred to the consistency of his practice and church custom in all places. Since then elsewhere he had secured the appointment of elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17) and required it in Crete (Titus 1:5-9), we may presume that the same pattern was worked out at Corinth. This is supported by the reference to some at Corinth who received remuneration for their spiritual labours (9:12). It could also be inferred from the teaching in chapter 12 on the distinctive roles and gifts within the body of Christ, each for the welfare and prosperity of the whole (vv.4-7 and 28). Elders were to rule and preside over the church’s life and this function receives mention when the title itself is not found (Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12 and 1 Timothy 3; Hebrews 13:7,17,24 has a different verb denoting the rule of leadership.) The title of ‘bishop’, or overseer, which also belongs to the elder (Acts 20:17), compared with v.28, Titus 1:5,7) further implies the exercise of rule in the congregation.

We deduce, therefore, that the congregational services of worship were under the control and direction of the elders. They led the church in prayer and praise and some provided the regular ministry of the Word — “those who laboured in the word and doctrine” (1 Timothy 5:17). Such a deduction relates back to our text in this interesting way. It indicates that the elements of praise and teaching upon which Paul has not commented, are to be maintained, but not by an individual’s usurping of the elders’ prerogatives. Further, we observe that the leading of worship lay in the rule of elders even when there were in the congregation men immediately moved by the Holy Spirit, such as tongue-speaking and prophets. The Holy Spirit will not prompt men to do what Christ by His authoritative word does not permit. Indeed the prophet and the truly spiritual man will acknowledge that the apostle’s directions are the commandments of the Lord (v.37).

The conclusion of the chapter (v.40) also concerns authoritative rule with its insistence that all the acceptable ingredients of worship should be carried out “decently and in order”. ‘Decently’ intimates a comeliness of manner, one

that is pleasing to God, and the phrase, 'in order' means 'according to arrangement', and here surely God's order.

Our brief study of this text has led us to consider these three matters which are relevant and important to Christian churches today. 1. Since the ingredients of Christian worship are clearly enumerated in the Scriptures, it is displeasing to God to introduce others. 2. There is no place for 'individualism' in the conduct of worship, but all must be submitted to the divine directions for the common good. 3. God has delegated the exercise of rule in worship to elders who are to ensure that all accords with the divine arrangement.

Footnote:

The writer is of the opinion that tongue-speaking, interpretation of tongues and predictive prophecy have no place in public worship today on the grounds that such miraculous gifts have been withdrawn from the Church.

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"... that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 15:5-6

The whole object of the apostle's prayer is to bring the minds of the Romans to true union of spirit, and to make them harmonize with each other. He shows, at the same time, this bond of unity to consist in their being of the same mind according to the will of Christ. Every conspiracy, combination and union, out of God, is misery; and whatever alienates our affections from the truth is out of God. And to make our union in Christ still more desirable, Paul points out its great necessity, since we cannot glorify God truly, unless the hearts of all believers unite to celebrate his praise, and their tongues also sing one joyful hallelujah to his glory. Let none dare to boast that he will glorify God in his own way; for the Fountain of love sets so high a value upon the unity of his servants, that he will not suffer his glory to be sounded in the midst of the din of discord and contention. This one thought, "our harmony in praising God", ought to silence for ever the madness and wantonness with which dispute and controversy are carried on by too many at the present period.

John Calvin