

First Corinthians

August 10, 2025

Chapter 14

The Matters of Worship Services – Part 4

“Guidance for Worship in the Church”

Chapter 14: 26 – 40

(e) Languages in Worship

(i) The Elements of Worship (14:26)

With everything discussed in Chapter 14, Paul seizes the opportunity to explore the elements and limitations of language in worship. First, let's consider the elements of worship. Verse 26.

“26 What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.”

First, the Song: Few people know the history of singing hymns in the Church. While the 150 Psalms were part of the Old Testament, the Church viewed the Old Testament as fully authoritative, just as it was for the Jews in the Synagogues. The Psalms were primarily the hymns of the Jewish Synagogues and Christian Churches. This is not to say that other hymns weren't composed as early as 110 AD, but they were not universally accepted or circulated within the Church. During his time in the Church, John Calvin (from about 1524 to 1564 AD) allowed only Psalms to be sung in worship services. He permitted more contemporary religious songs to be used outside of worship services. Martin Luther (from about 1500 to 1546) disagreed and wrote hymns for the Catholic Church. Martin Luther died a Catholic. The Lutherans did not separate from the Catholic Church until after his death. Isaac Watts began writing hymns around 1690 AD that gained widespread acceptance. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” and “Joy to the World” are just two of the more than 750 hymns penned by Watts. However, in Paul's day, the only songs sung in Church were from the Hebrew Hymnbook, the Psalms. By that time, they had been translated into Latin, Greek, Aramaic, Syrian, and many other languages.

Secondly, the Teaching: Each saint in the early Church came prepared. They didn't arrive merely to be fed; they came to nourish others. They were ready to share a lesson from the Old Testament.

Third, a Revelation: The Greek word for Revelation is the same as the title of the last book of the Bible—*Apokalupsis* (Apocalypse). It signifies lifting the curtain to reveal meaning. In the church congregation, everyone had the opportunity to uncover or explain the significance of the Old Testament passage. Consider this elaboration essential for understanding the doctrinal passage.

Fourth, each saint has a native language in addition to the congregation's common language and is ready to use it if someone visits the Church and needs help understanding the message.

Fifth, an interpretation: As the saints come with a song, a teaching, a revelation, and a language for each service, they must also offer a thoughtful interpretation from their native language to the common language of the congregation.

Why are these five things viewed as the essential elements of each service? Paul asserts that everything in the service is “*done for the edification*” of both the saints and non-believers present.

(ii) The Limitation of Languages (14:27-28)

With the five elements established, Paul now outlines the limitations of the languages spoken during the service. Verses 27-28.

²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and one must interpret; ²⁸ but if there is no interpreter, he must keep silent in the Church; and let him speak to himself and to God.

As the service continues and each language represented in the Church is prepared to speak, here is the first limitation: no more than two or three individuals who do not speak the common language of the congregation may present their messages. Additionally, either they or someone from the congregation must interpret so that everyone can know and understand what is being said.

Here is the second limitation. Here is the answer to the scenario I set up with the Albanian-Messapic preacher in verse 13, who is unable to interpret his own message, and no one in the service can interpret it for him. The limitation of the Albanian-Messapic preacher is that he must not preach; he must remain silent. Since he is not allowed to speak due to the absence of an interpreter, he can communicate with God in his own language silently, and God will hear and bless him.

Verses 27 and 28 emphasize the importance of planning the service in advance, including determining who will be allowed to speak. If a person understands the common language of the congregation but struggles to express themselves in a way that is clear to the congregation, and another member understands their native language and can interpret it while they speak, then they should be permitted to speak in their native language with the interpreter conveying their message. However, if no interpreter is available, they should not be permitted to speak during the service.

Back in 1975, I attended a Methodist service in Laird Hill, Texas. I was on staff at the Baptist Church, which shared a parking lot with the Methodist Church. It was a Charismatic Methodist Church. A dear friend invited me to join them on Tuesday night, and I accepted. Everything went smoothly. The music was wonderful, the LORD’s Supper was perfect, and the preacher was excellent—until someone in the congregation interrupted and began speaking what was clearly gibberish. He continued for so long that another person interjected with more gibberish. Then, a third person joined in. The preacher lost control of the service. Two hours later, as the gibberish persisted, my friend and I decided it was time to leave. No one interpreted anything spoken during my visit. My church had seen several families move across the parking lot that year, leaving the Methodist Church. They knew I visited, but only one person mentioned it to me. They switched to the Baptist Church because their Methodist services had devolved into the same chaos I witnessed. Later, I learned that the same individuals routinely interrupted the pastor at every service. Paul would have said, “Stop them and do not let them speak.” To make matters worse, I later found out that it was a coordinated scheme to oust the pastor. They were successful. The next time the Methodist Church shuffled the pastors, a new one came in.

(iii) The Limitation of Preaching (14:29)

Paul now establishes the boundary for preaching.

²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment.

In this passage, Paul refers to preachers or pastors, not fortune tellers. Additionally, note that Paul does not use the phrase “at the most” as he did for those who wished to provide their testimony in verse 27.

What does this limitation mean? We must remember, at this point in the timeline of the Church, that the New Testament has not yet been completed and compiled into a single collection of letters. The Church may have a copy of the Old Testament, and if it does not possess a complete version, it at least has some portions. The Church is rapidly expanding across the Roman Empire, and all the Apostles are still in various parts of the world teaching the words of Jesus (except for Judas Iscariot and James, who have both passed away). Pastors and preachers are evangelizing throughout the empire and beyond. They are gaining new insights about the teachings of Jesus, similar to how Apollos had to be brought up to speed by Priscilla and Aquila regarding Jesus and His Church. Corinth serves as a crossroads between the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire, with all maritime travel passing through it. Preachers traveling to different destinations would visit the Church and seek opportunities to preach. Little has changed in two thousand years. Paul states that all preachers residing in or visiting Corinth should be allowed to preach while they are there. If there are more than three, those preachers should sit and listen. He will explain why in the next verse. Furthermore, in verse 29, he says, “*and let the others discern.*” The term “discern” is more appropriate than “judgment” in this context. To “discern” means to *perceive or recognize the differences or distinctions between two or more things*; it does not imply judging in the way we typically interpret that word today.

(iv) The Limitation of Revelation (14:30-32)

Paul outlines the limitations on the exchange of revelations that may occur regarding the preachers seated in the pews who are listening to the two or three preachers in the pulpit, as noted in verse 30.

³⁰ But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, the first one must keep silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; ³² and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; ³³ for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the Churches of the saints.

Remember, “revelation” means *to uncover*. In this context, Paul gives the preachers seated in the pews permission to share their thoughts during the message delivered from the pulpit. When that happens, the preacher in the pulpit must allow them to participate. In other words, the preachers act as moderators for the service’s theological topics, enabling all the saints to learn and grow in the Lord. However, Paul does set a limit on who can engage in the discussion – “*and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets....*” Here, Paul indicates that the discussion during the sermon should involve only the preachers or pastors present in the service. Those who are untrained

should refrain from sharing their thoughts at this time; their opportunity to contribute comes during the testimony portion of the service.

Then Paul says, *“For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”* All the preachers were either first- or second-generation disciples of Jesus or the Apostles. They learned directly from either Jesus or an Apostle about fulfilling the LORD’s command to make disciples. Paul had an entire team of preachers-in-training under his supervision. John, who authored Revelation, also had a team. He trained the pastors of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation and appointed them to their respective congregations. During discussion time in the services, Paul instructs that only those who are trained should speak. This plan ensures that everyone hears the LORD’s message and that no one adds anything that might confuse His teachings in the Church. In this way, no arguments will arise that could harm the understanding and hearts of immature saints and non-believers. The services will create a peaceful environment for all.

(v) The Limitation of Women (14:34-35)

To ensure he addresses all the saints during church worship services, Paul outlines the restrictions placed on women in verses 34 -35.

“³⁴ The women are to keep silent in the Churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says. ³⁵ If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in Church.”

In Chapter 11:2-16, Paul discusses how women's dress in the Church. Here, he emphasizes women's speech in the Church.

“The women are to keep silent...” Paul’s instruction means that women should intentionally choose to say nothing or refrain from speaking in situations where speaking may be considered inappropriate. What is the context here? It arises when preachers give sermons, and other preachers in the pews pose questions during worship services (14:29-32). This discussion time during the service is meant for the edification of all listeners. At that time, the Old Testament was the primary written Scripture used by the Church. Nevertheless, the Apostles were actively teaching all that Jesus had imparted to them. Consequently, as the preachers spoke, they would certainly inform the congregation about what an Apostle had said regarding an Old Testament passage. While speaking, a preacher in the pew would contribute to the sermon he had heard from another Apostle. Thus, the entire congregation would benefit from the teachings of all the Apostles.

“...for they [women] are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves....” The term signifies *arranging in order*. In worship services, men are to deliver the messages to the whole congregation. It is not the role of women to deliver these messages. Paul did not impose this restriction during the testimony time of the service, only during the preaching “*subject*” time. Had women been restricted from the testimony time, he certainly would have mentioned that limitation before stating the restrictions for the preaching time of the service. He did not.

Who are the women to “subject themselves to?” Paul states, “*If they want to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church.*” Women should subject themselves to their “*husbands at home*” if they have a question about what was said during the preaching portion of the worship service. In other words, when a woman has a question, the proper order for obtaining an answer is to discuss it with her husband at home first. Undoubtedly, if the husband does not have the answer, they can take it to the pastor privately; however, the service is not the place to interject a question from the congregation.

It is interesting that Paul states, “*If they desire to learn anything.*” At that time in Greece, women had no independent existence under Greek law. However, with the rise of the Roman Empire, which absorbed Greece, women began receiving education alongside men in reading, writing, and math. They managed their own businesses and actively participated in the markets. They were certainly not uneducated. Their role in political society was limited; they could not attend, speak, or vote at political assemblies, nor could they hold political positions in government, although a few exceptions existed depending on the Caesar in power at the time. In the realm of world religions, men held leadership roles. Still, women occupied prominent positions in those false religions as priestesses, conducting ceremonies and performing sacred rituals. In many of those religions, the sacred rituals were sexual in nature. The priestesses operated as temple prostitutes, ensuring a steady flow of money to support the religion. In Chapter 10:23, I mentioned 69 gods that had temples in Corinth. Those temples were financially supported by the income generated by the temple priestesses and the sale of meat offered in sacrificial rituals in the marketplace. My point is that women in Corinth were not ignorant in any sense. Outside the walls of the Church, women actively engaged in the community in numerous ways.

When Paul says, “*If they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in Church,*” he indicates a proper order for addressing questions about God's spiritual matters. At that time, the Apostles held the keys to those answers, while their preaching disciples spread the word and taught the Churches.

In verse 34, Paul stated, “*...just as the Law also says.*” Most Bible commentators reference Genesis 3:16 as evidence that a woman must submit to her husband. It states that “*man is to rule over the woman.*” However, it is important to note that Genesis tells the story of humanity before the Law was established through Moses at Mount Sinai, as found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It seems unlikely that Paul is citing Genesis as evidence. Instead, Paul likely references Numbers 30:1-16, where the LORD provides instructions to women and outlines the authority of fathers or husbands over them. In the chapter from Numbers, we discover that the man is accountable to the LORD, and the woman is under the man, who can be her father or husband. The phrase, “*...just as the Law also says,*” pertains to the entire sentence in verse 34, but particularly to the words, “*but are to subject themselves.*” The complete sentence reads, “*The women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.*” Verses 35 and 36 contain Paul's instructions on the subject.

(vi) The Limitation of the Members (14:36-38)

Paul talks about the limitations of the members.

³⁶ *Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?* ³⁷ *If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.* ³⁸ *But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.*

In verse 36, Paul asks, “*Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only?*” Of all that Paul has said in this letter about the troubling issues in the Corinth Church, these two questions are the most scathing and accusatory regarding the immature saints' mindset. Paul charges the Jewish brethren in the Corinth Church with thinking and acting as if they are the Church of Churches, the only Church that knows the will of God. It is the only Church that God has spoken to and the only Church that can speak for God—the first Church of all the Churches.

To this, Paul challenges and criticizes the Church's thinking. He says, “*If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment.*”

Wham! Paul has metaphorically slapped the Jewish brethren of the Corinth Church in the face. Let's put it in contemporary terms.

“If you think that you are the LORD's preachers, the holder of all the things of God, and you are the spiritual of spiritual, think again! I have said to you in the LORD's command, and you better take heed of my words.”

Then Paul states the consequence for ignoring his words in this letter. “*But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.*” Wow! Those are strong words. Let's find a modern way to express this.

“If you do not recognize what I am saying is the LORD's command and change your ways, you will not be recognized as being a mature saint.”

We can paraphrase these statements because Paul, in this letter, addresses immaturity, divisions, disagreements, spirituality, and the failure to manage immorality in the Church. In tackling these troubling issues, Paul has conveyed the LORD's commands to correct them.

(7) The Plea for Proper Preaching and Languages (14:39-40)

We discussed verse 39 in the commentary that begins with verse 2 of the Church, which warns that everything in between aims to correct how the Corinthian Church managed the use of various languages in their worship services and the appropriate order for those services. Now, we revisit verses 39 - 40.

³⁹ *Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues.* ⁴⁰ *But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.*

The word “*Therefore*” signifies a reflection on everything that has been said, and as we move forward, we must adhere to this. Based on the LORD’s commands that Paul conveyed in this letter, the Church should prioritize the preaching aspect of the worship service while still allowing those who speak other languages to participate, with one caveat. That caveat is found in verse 40: “*But all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner.*” Paul has outlined the proper order for the services as commanded by the LORD. There is no doubt that Paul will expect everything to be in order when he arrives at the Church later that year.

Paul concludes by stating, “*desire earnestly to prophesy.*” Prophesying refers to preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. From here, Paul transitions to the significance of the Gospel in the longest chapter of this letter.