



**AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH**  
*A Study in 1 Corinthians*  
**TEACHER – Lesson 21**

**GENERAL OUTLINE**

**1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40, Unity and spiritual gifts**

**OUTLINE: Lesson 21**

**1 Corinthians 14:1-40, Gifts in the assembly (i.e., “in church”)**

14:1-5 General statement: prophecy is preferred over “tongues”

14:6-19 Extended explanation of the limited usefulness of uninterpreted “tongues”

**14:20-25 Tongues, prophecy, unbelievers, and believers**

**14:26-40 Specific guidelines for orderly church assemblies**

In the latter half of chapter 14 Paul finally lands on the exact problem of the disorderly services of the Corinthian church, especially as it related to the use of spiritual gifts in the assemblies of the church. He had laid a solid foundation by explaining the way members of a body rely and depend on each other (chap. 12). The centrality of love in those relationships reinforced the foundation in chapter 13. The first half of chapter 14 deals with the general deficiencies of speaking in languages that aren’t understood by the hearers. 1 Corinthians 14:20-40 makes specific application of these principles to the gatherings of the congregation.

More than any other passage in the New Testament, verses 26-40 give a brief, but not exhaustive, glimpse of 1<sup>st</sup> century church assemblies. This section reveals some activities of their gatherings; it also calls for some level of organization and decorum for those meetings. Simply stated, spirit-filled exuberance should not overshadow edification. Paul’s instructions, which to some extent are direct restrictions on behavior, assume a specific setting that the Corinthians would recognize as being “in church,” and sets the purpose for those gatherings.

**DISCUSSION**

**1 Corinthians 14:20-25, Tongues, prophecy, unbelievers, and believers**

The quotation from Isaiah 28:11, 12 is a statement of Isaiah highlighting the disobedience of Israel and a warning to Judah not to repeat the same mistakes. Because they refused to listen to their own prophets, God would subject them to peoples of other “tongues and lips,” referring to the Assyrians. And even then, they would not listen and repent. Paul makes a broad use of the quotation as an example of languages that people don’t understand and therefore can’t benefit from them.

- 1. At first reading this comment about the need for spiritual maturity (v. 20) might seem not to fit the context. What specifically might Paul mean by “mature” (NIV: adults) in the context of this discussion of how to use spiritual gifts?**

Christian maturity isn't about acquiring gifts, and even less about showing how gifted one is. Christian maturity calls for an understanding of the roles of love and fellowship among members of the body of Christ. A mature Christian realizes that gifts are to be used out of love for others to build the church and its individual members.

- 2. If uninterpreted “tongues” are forbidden “in church” (v. 28), and if unbelieving visitors would be mystified if this restriction were disregarded (v. 23), but yet tongues were intended primarily as a sign to unbelievers (v.22), what use then would there be for uninterpreted languages (tongues) other than for personal, private satisfaction (v. 4) (cf. Acts 2)?**

If “tongues” are, in fact, human languages, then uninterpreted languages would be of value when speaking to people for whom the “tongue” spoken was their mother tongue, or their commonly used language. This would have been of great value for the apostles and others as they spread the gospel throughout the world to all nations and tongues.

In Acts 2, tongues were spoken to unbelievers who understood those tongues as their native languages. This was not an “in church” setting.

- 3. Does Paul restrict “speaking in tongues” in any setting other than “in church”?**

No. In private it was acceptable, but was probably not the main purpose intended by this gift since the gifts were given primarily to edify others and were not given primarily for self. Speaking in tongues outside the meetings of the church isn't addressed by Paul.

- 4. For whose benefit are the assemblies “when the whole church comes together”? How would a nonbeliever benefit from a prophecy that is intended primarily for believers? Compare this to our own services where the sermon is designed primarily for members, but visitors are welcome.**

Even though we insist on “extending the invitation” at nearly every service, biblically, most assemblies of the church are spiritual family gatherings designed for “the edification of the church” (v. 12, cf. the Lord's Supper setting in chapter 11). Visitors are welcome, and since teaching is presented in a language common to most or all members, visitors could probably understand the message even if certain ideas may be somewhat obscure due to their limited knowledge, but not because of language issues.

## **1 Corinthians 14:26-40, Specific guidelines for orderly church assemblies**

The Corinthian church services were exuberant and genuinely “spirit-filled,” but not edifying. The problem wasn’t with the nature of the gifts but the misuse of them. They were being used for a purpose that wasn’t the one which God intended. They were used for the selfish benefit of the users rather than for the benefit of the body as described in chapter 12.

- 5. Paul clearly identifies the setting for the following restrictions as “in church” (v. 28) or “whenever you come together” (vv. 23, 26) (cf. Lesson # 20). What is the purpose for these assemblies? He repeats that purpose several times in the chapter? What other terms does he use in the chapter to explain what the primary purpose includes?**

Primary purpose: Edification (vv. 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26)

Subpoints: to learn & encourage (v. 31), exhortation & comfort (v. 3), to give revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching (v. 6), to teach (v. 19). These could all be grouped under the general heading of “edification.”

- 6. In this discussion of various church assembly elements in chap. 14, Paul is focused mostly on the various teaching formats (e.g., v. 26). What other assembly activity was introduced with the same “when you come together as a church” phrase in an earlier chapter?**

The Lord’s Supper in 11:18 is the other event. Whether the Lord’s Supper was included in the same gathering as the activities of chapter 14 is unclear, but whether separate or together, with the information we have, these are the activities that we know were included in formal “in church” assemblies.

- 7. How many times does Paul mention “worship” as the purpose of church gatherings?**

None. The word “worship” is used only once in the chapter (v. 25), but in that case it is the reaction of a visitor and not the purpose of the meeting for Christians. The word “praise” is another word that Paul doesn’t use to define church gatherings, and the term “worship service” is not used as a name for that service. See next question.

This is not to say that praise or worship are not a part of church services, but they are not terms used in 1 Corinthians to designate the primary purpose. Paul doesn’t order some restrictions on the meetings because the disorder would defile worship, but because the various benefits of the service (cf. the answer to question 5 above) would be impeded by the neglect of such orderliness.

TEACHER: Ask the group to discuss possible names other than “worship service” that could be used to designate our meetings.

An observation: Traditional services in churches of Christ have a strong emphasis on edification through preaching and teaching as well as through fellowship and encouragement. Worship is also included. My point isn’t that what we are doing is wrong. In fact, our emphasis on various avenues of edification is consistent with scripture, but our terminology (e.g., worship services) suggests a dominant focus that doesn’t reflect reality or scripture.

Consider also Ephesians 4:11-16. This passage isn’t specifically about our assemblies, but reveals a major function of God-given structure and our interaction with each other in the church. New Testament descriptions of roles in the church say a lot more about teaching roles than “worship leaders.”

**8. Assuming that Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:16 can be applied to the assembly, what are the purposes of our congregational singing? To whom do we sing?**

Purpose: a) to speak to each other, teaching and admonishing each other;  
b) to give thanks to God.

Audience: We sing both to each other and to God. The statement often made that, “We aren’t singing for each other but for God,” isn’t exactly true. It is true that musical quality that pleases humans isn’t the main objective, but we still sing to each other and to God. Obviously, teaching and admonishing are more about message than musical proficiency.

**9. Paul limits the number of people who should be allowed to speak to the congregation. Was he concerned about services lasting too long, or something else? How might the thought of Philippians 2:3-4 relate to assemblies of the church?**

He is concerned with effective edification and exhibiting humility and love in our together activities. Part of the problem in Corinth was that several people were speaking at once (and sometimes in different languages). Even if they weren’t speaking all at once, he wanted them to limit the number of speakers to promote edification. It could be that excessive length can also wear people out to the point that any message would be undermined. Even someone inspired by the Holy Spirit didn’t have to speak at every service (v. 32). In other words, the principle and ideal of Philippians 2:3-4 should be applied to church services.

**10. In the absence of an interpreter, what was the speaker of languages (tongues) to do? When a prophet had something to say and another prophet was already speaking, what was the first speaker to do? What, in this usage, did it mean to be silent? Could the “silent” person still join in congregational singing or say, “Amen,” out loud to what others said (v. 16)?**

Without interpretation, the speaker in languages was to be silent. If a prophet were speaking and another prophet had something to add, the first one was to be silent. To “be silent” meant to quit addressing the congregation and yield the floor to someone else. It did not mean that the silent person couldn’t make any sound the rest of the service. He could certainly participate in songs, and say, “Amen,” now and then.

**11. Paul doesn’t spell out details such as how many songs and prayers to have in a service, or how long the sermon should be, but he does call for a level of orderliness that avoids confusion (vv. 33, 40). What principles run throughout this whole section (chapters 12-14) that the practices of the Corinthian church were violating (cf. 14:4-12)?**

Paul opposed self-centeredness in all areas of life, including the assemblies of the church. On the matter of spiritual gifts, the Corinthians seem to have been following the principle of “if I can, I will.” The gifts weren’t given to be put on display, but to be used with humility and love to edify each other. So the issue isn’t really about how many speakers should speak, but coming together as members of one body caring for each other.

**12. As we noted in question 10, in the absence of an interpreter the speaker of languages was to “keep silent” (v. 28). The prophet was also to “be silent” (v. 30), yielding the floor to another. The same word for silent (Greek, *sigao*) is used in reference to the women “in the churches” (v. 34). Could the women sing or say, “Amen,” to a prayer or a speaker?**

The silent women could sing and say, “Amen,” just like the prophets who had yielded the floor could. The only difference was that the women’s “silence” meant that they were not to take the floor and address the congregation at any time “in church.”

When Paul says that women are to be “in silence” in 1 Timothy 2:11, 12, he uses a different word (*hesuchia*), which means quietness and describes one who doesn’t meddle in the affairs of others. Earlier in the same chapter Paul uses the adjective form (*hesuchios*) in 1 Timothy 2:2 where Christians hope to live “quiet” lives. It is more about an attitude than not speaking.

**13. What additional statements does Paul make other than “keep silent” to clarify and emphasize the silence of the women?**

Twice he emphasizes the point, first with a statement about the women not being permitted to speak (v. 34b), then with “it is shameful for women to speak in church” (v. 35b).

**14. Many churches have decided to disregard Paul’s instruction that the women are to keep silent in church. If Paul didn’t want the women to address the congregation “in church,” how could he have said it more clearly than he did?**

Sometimes people will deny that an action is actually prohibited unless there is a direct “thou shalt not” statement, claiming that if it were expressly forbidden they wouldn’t do it. A frequent example is that there isn’t a direct command not to use instrumental music in church services, and therefore, we can probably go ahead and use them.

On the matter of women taking a recognized speaking role in church, Paul made a very direct statement. It is clear and firm. Paul says that the women are to be silent in church. He adds that they are not permitted to speak, and it is shameful if they speak. This is more than adequately clear for someone who wants to obey. For the others, they will find an excuse regardless of how clear the commandment is.

Some commentators claim that this restriction applied only to the Corinthian church (and not to others then or since) since it was only in Corinth that the women were creating a disturbance. This is based solely on the assumption that if the Corinthian women had not been speaking too much, he wouldn’t have mentioned the issue. But other than this obscure possibility, nothing in the entire letter traces any of the problems to the women of the congregation. In addition, Paul expressly states that this restriction applies “in the churches” (vv. 33, 34), which implies more than only the Corinthian church. Unlike earlier references to “in church,” use of the definite article “the” in these two verses indicates that this is not limited to the “assemblies” of the Corinthian congregation.

**15. How does Paul respond to potential objections by someone who claimed to be speaking as moved by the Holy Spirit, and therefore thought he could override Paul’s instructions?**

He asserts forcefully that what he wrote on these topics were “commandments of the Lord” (v. 37).