

1 Corinthians 14:20-40: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verses 20 to 40 If therefore the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?

But if all prophesy and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all. The secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation? Let all things be done for building up.

If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two, or at most three, and each in turn and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church, and speak to himself and to God.

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn, and all be encouraged.

[1 : 34] And the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion, but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches.

For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home, for it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.

If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. So my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order.

In the second half of 1 Corinthians chapter 14, Paul continues his discussion of appropriate speech in the meetings of the church. In the earlier part of the chapter, he emphasized the intelligibility of speech.

[2 : 39] Why? Because speech ought to serve the purpose of edification of the entire church. It is important to see the ways that Paul establishes a lively traffic between deep theological principles and practical situations.

So rather than immediately tackling the question of tongues speaking head on, he first discusses the unity of the church in the one spirit, and the manner in which the manifestations of the spirit, in their variegated forms, are gifts of the spirit for the sake of building others up, not marks of personal spirituality for puffing ourselves up.

He then explores the governing principle of love, its absolute necessity, its superlative character, and its enduring nature. And only then does he move into speaking about tongues.

When he makes this move, it is these deeper principles that remain operative throughout. Speech in the church must build up. It must be governed by love. So spiritual speech must be exercised for the sake of others.

Consequently, it must be intelligible speech. It must also be mindful of others in a way that produces orderliness, not the jostling for status that had characterised the Corinthians' speech to this point.

[3 : 51] To understand Paul, it is really important to recognise the principles that are working themselves out in his instructions, and the instructions that are developing his principles. The interplay between these two levels is productive of insight, not least because developing familiarity with this interplay will equip us to apply Pauline principles in our own situations.

Paul's way of reasoning is not accidental. He doesn't give bare commands, but presents rich and subtle arguments. He speaks to his readers as those who need to internalise a mature way of thinking in Christ, rather than just as children to be dictated to.

Paul is teaching us not just what to think as Christians, but how to think as Christians. And Paul is concerned not just with what the Corinthians do, but with how and why they do it.

Throughout this epistle, he is speaking to communicate a mindset with its motivations, values, priorities, desires and loves, not just an external behavioural code.

He begins this second half of the chapter with a charge to be mature in our thinking. He has already rebuked the Corinthians for the childishness of their thinking earlier, in chapter 3, verses 1-4.

[5 : 04] But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.

And even now you are not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human?

Like Christ, who put a child in the midst of his disciples as an example of the kingdom, Paul sees ways in which we should emulate children or infants. Infants are not invested in the same status conflicts that we can be as adults.

Infants and children are humble. They are untrained in evil. In other respects, however, we must pursue maturity. Throughout this chapter, for instance, he is stressing that the Christian faith is not one of irrational, ecstatic spirituality, but rather one of communication, the intelligible word, and sound minds.

Ours is a faith in which our minds are called to be holy and lovingly engaged. Paul, at this point, loosely quotes from Isaiah chapter 28 concerning the speaking of tongues, and he re-tailors the reference to highlight its relevance.

[6 : 19] Isaiah chapter 28 verses 7 to 13 reads, These also reel with wine, and stagger with strong drink. The priest and the prophet reel with strong drink. They are swallowed by wine.

They stagger with strong drink. They reel in vision. They stumble in giving judgment. For all the tables are full of filthy vomit, with no space left. To whom will he teach knowledge?

And to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk? Those taken from the breast? For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, hear a little, there a little.

For by people of strange lips, and with a foreign tongue, the Lord will speak to this people, to whom he has said, This is rest, give rest to the weary, and this is repose. Yet they would not hear, and the word of the Lord will be to them, precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, Here a little, there a little, that they may go and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.

As usual, when we're hearing a New Testament allusion, or a citation of an Old Testament text, we should consider the context of the text that's being referenced. And here in Isaiah, the prophet is addressing priests and prophets.

[7 : 35] They are given over to decadent revelries, and dulled to the word of the Lord. They dismiss Isaiah's message as childish and simple. So the Lord will send Assyrians to them, with their harsh foreign tongue, in judgment upon their insensibility to his word.

Paul shows how Isaiah's prophecy can speak into the situation at Corinth. Tongue speaking for Paul serves as a sign of judgment upon unbelieving people, particularly unbelieving Jews.

When it's practiced in worship, without being put into words, it puts believing Christians in the position of those who are being judged. You can think back to the story of the day of Pentecost.

In Acts chapter 2, verse 12, there is the statement of people who are looking by, saying that they are filled with new wine. Tongue speaking is a reversal of Babel, as many have observed, but it's also a repeating of Babel.

While some are surprised by understanding, others are struck with confusion and a failure to recognize. You can maybe think back to the story of 1 Samuel chapter 1, where Eli fails to appreciate that Hannah is praying and thinks that she is drunk.

[8 : 42] That again is a judgment upon his failure to perceive, and a sign of the reversal that will take place in the future. Tongue speaking, then, can be a sign of God's judgment upon those who do not believe.

And such speech is a negative sign, judgment upon unbelievers, and it isn't going to bring anyone to the understanding of faith. The unbelievers witnessing such tongue speaking will think that they are mad.

While the supposedly spiritual Corinthians thought that ecstatic tongue speaking demonstrated that God was with them in a special way, this wouldn't be what unbelievers would see. Prophecy, by contrast, is intelligible speech, and it has a very different effect.

They are sober words inspired by the Spirit. They speak directly to the situation of a specific church and its members. It has a force of witness to the truth of God's dwelling among his people.

Before such speech, the unbeliever recognizes the exposure of his heart to God, and is convicted of his sin and made aware of God's glory. God is truly among a people when God's word is present among them, when God's Spirit speaks directly into their situation.

[9 : 52] In the Corinthian church, there seems to have been something of a free-for-all in their assemblies. Much as in their celebration of the supper, everyone was seemingly jostling to get ahead of others, each wanting to capture as much of the limelight as they could for their spiritual showboating.

The result was a chaotic situation, where everyone was competing with everyone else. Far from building others up, the purpose had become puffing themselves up. And Paul advocates constraint, order, and politeness in speech against the rude chaos that prevailed in the Corinthian church.

The measure of the exercise of gifts must be the building up of the community, not our own personal elevation. The criterion of building up is something to which Paul repeatedly returns in this chapter, in verses 3, 5, 12, 26. As the primary form of loving practice, it is the touchstone of appropriate behaviour in the assembly.

If you are not building others up, it does not belong in your practice. If people are going to speak in tongues, then, they need to do so in an orderly manner, in a manner appropriate to a dignified, respectable, polite, and well-regulated assembly, an assembly where people are giving thought to each other.

No more than three should do it. They should take turns, and their tongue speaking should take the form of intelligible words. However, if a person cannot put their tongue speaking into intelligible words, they should hold their peace.

[11 : 25] The ESV and other translations, by suggesting that there is a separate person, an interpreter, and a separate act, the act of interpretation, likely mistake the meaning of these verses, which rather speak to the persons putting into words the tongue speaking that they have.

Paul expresses his instructions concerning prophetic speech in far more encouraging terms, in a manner that contrasts with his teaching concerning tongues. While, at most, three people should speak in tongues, Paul doesn't speak of prophecy in the same reserved terms.

Prophets seem to have played an especially important role in the life of the early church. We need to consider the way that the Spirit works in the life of the church. The Spirit gives his gifts for the building up of the church, and the gifts that are needed can change from time to time.

For instance, in the story of the Exodus, the gift of embroidery is given to Bezalel and others, and the point of that is to build up and establish the tabernacle. When the tabernacle is built, there is no longer the same need for that gift as there was when it was first being constructed.

Likewise, there are various signs that we have in Scripture, and ways in which God acts miraculously or in a hyper-natural way to provide for his people. And these things are generally temporary, for a particular period in time where these things are needed.

[12 : 46] The manna in the wilderness was for a particular period. When they entered into the land and ate of the fruit of the land, the manna was cut off. And prophecy seems to have served in a similar sort of way.

Prophecy is especially important in a pioneer situation where there are not robust, established teaching ministries and doctrine, where there are a lot of young Christians, and where there is not the body of the New Testament revelation established.

We shouldn't dismiss prophetic gifts today, but we shouldn't be surprised if they are not prominent features of the life of the church, and that where they are more prominent, there may be significant limitations for which they are compensating.

Prophecies, in Paul's understanding, must be tested. And Paul seems to speak of a situation where prophets delivered their prophecies, which were then weighed by the leaders of the assembly, who were to discern whether it was true prophecy that spoke to the situation of the church, that was consistent with the truth of the gospel, and that came from God.

In a church like Corinth, we can well imagine that much supposed prophecy was likely just self-serving and self-deceived, fancies by which people desiring greater influence claim charismatic powers, by which they could assume greater prominence within the life of the congregation.

[14 : 04] True spiritual speech is not chaotic and confused, but orderly and peaceful. The spirit creates order, peace and harmony. The spirit encourages love and regard for others, so we do not push ourselves ahead of them, but wait for others.

The point of this entire exercise, then, is not spiritual showboating, but the learning and encouragement of the church. And for this, prophets need to be modest and self-effacing.

The point is not to get the attention of others, but to minister to them. The concluding verses of this chapter have excited much debate and controversy. They are offensive to some modern sensibilities, and many suggestions have been presented for how to deal with them.

There are also questions about how to reconcile this passage with things that we read elsewhere. So, for instance, women engaging in prophetic speech in the assembly seems to be regarded by Paul as appropriate in chapter 11.

And then many have argued that there is the fact that there is no clear teaching in the Old Testament requiring the sort of silence that Paul speaks of here. Then there's the question of the challenge of relating this text to Paul's treatment of equality between men and women in the Gospel more generally.

[15 : 15] Some, like Philip Payne, have suggested that these words, are non-Pauline interpolations. They're verses not authored by Paul, which have been wrongfully inserted into the text at this point, and have come down to us, but don't really belong in the text of 1 Corinthians.

The strength of these arguments seems to rest, in large part, upon the conviction that these verses are inconsistent with Pauline theology in general. If people did not believe that there was inconsistency, it would be unlikely that this argument would be presented.

Others have argued that Paul is quoting and refuting a Corinthian argument, as he quotes and refutes Corinthian slogans earlier in this letter. Lucy Pepiat is one of the most prominent recent advocates of this position.

However, there are several problems with this sort of reading. Paul's refutations elsewhere do not involve such lengthy quotations of arguments. If Paul is refuting Corinthian arguments here, they take a very different form from earlier refutations.

An expression such as, in all the churches of the saints, also raises some difficult questions for many advocates of this position, as it might be making a statement of general church practice, not merely advancing an argument about what should be done.

[16 : 28] There are also a number of strands that connect these verses with those preceding them. There's the concern for speaking, silence and order, which is the concern of the preceding verses. As in chapter 11, there are also concerns about honour and shame, propriety, the proper relationship and differentiation and the good order between the sexes in the assembly.

Beyond this, these verses don't seem to stand alone in the Pauline epistles. Specific directions for women's speech, which seem to teach comparable restrictions, can be found in 1 Timothy chapter 2 verses 8 to 15.

I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling. Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who prefer scarletiness, with good works.

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, rather she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Yet she will be saved through childbearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control. There are many attempts to avoid the force of biblical teaching on the subject of the difference between the sexes and the differing responsibilities and expectations of men and women.

[17 : 57] These can often depend upon atomising the biblical witness, and treating each text in abstraction from the broader biblical witness. However, the biblical witness is deeply interrelated.

Paul's teaching, for instance, makes reference back to the pattern of creation and the order established in the Old Covenant assembly. The biblical witness is like a root system, which bears the weight of a whole tree in a highly distributed way, rather than focusing at all upon detached texts, each of which must stand alone.

Putting it differently, avoiding the force of the scriptural teaching is less like dodging successive rocks falling down a mountainside, and more like trying to dodge an avalanche, the collective and the cumulative force of the witness matters.

Likewise, we must be aware of explaining away texts in a way that neuters them, yet fails to explain why supposedly perplexing and unclear texts were inspired in the first place.

On the other hand, there are many who treat such texts in a narrow and legalistic manner, and fail to relate them to the core principles that are operating in Paul's theology.

[19 : 03] If we read these verses in a way that makes it appear that Paul has forgotten or abandoned the governing themes of his theology, and his immediate argument at this point, something has gone seriously awry.

Whatever Paul is saying must fit with his broader themes, his concerns for love, unity and building up of others, a reading that suggests that Paul is simply advancing men over women would be utterly out of keeping with the tenor of his theology more generally, and the nature of his argument in these chapters.

Paul's concern is probably best understood as one of holding that women keep their ordered place, not one of submission as such. Many have seen Paul's teaching here as arising out of Genesis chapter 3 verse 16, and the judgment upon the woman at that point.

But again, I think that is mistaken. Many have argued that Paul's concern is with a very contextual problem, with the disorderly speech of women in the Corinthian assembly, something that was very peculiar to that particular congregation.

The women's section of the church is supposedly disruptively speaking during the assembly, unsettling proceedings. Yet Paul does not narrowly focus upon disruptive speech, but upon women's speech more generally.

[20 : 12] Likewise, he appeals to Old Testament precedent and principle, and to the universal practice of the church. Similar things can be said about 1 Timothy chapter 2, where there is another reference to the general practice of the church, a presentation of general principle, and then the articulation of a creation pattern as that upon which the principle rests.

General church practice seems to weigh strongly in his argument too. In their disorderly practice, the Corinthians are setting themselves against the practice of the churches more generally. They are proudly setting themselves up, as if God's word originated from them and was only given to them.

They think themselves to reign like kings, and so they set up their own rules. As women's speaking is presented as entirely appropriate when done in an orderly way in chapter 11, we seem to need to clarify the sort of speech that he is proscribing here.

It seems most likely that the speech in question is that in view in the previous verses. It's the speech of testing and weighing the words of the prophets. If they want to question, they should do so in the appropriate domestic setting, not in the public assembly.

Apart from anything else, a woman cross-examining a male prophet in such a public setting would bring dishonour and would be seen as unbecoming in the society. The categories of politeness, dignity, decorum, honour, good custom, and things like that do have some weight in Paul's thinking.

[21 : 39] Where does Paul get this principle from? It seems to me he gets it primarily from Genesis, where the man is created as the guardian of the garden before the woman. He's the one who's charged with upholding and teaching the law.

And from the Old Testament more generally, where the governing assembly was male. The appointed guardians of the church are male also. They're appointed not for their own spiritual self-importance and self-aggrandizement, but in order to provide strong overseeing of the congregation.

And here we must remember Paul's principles. Such guarding, if it's to be appropriate, must be characterised by humble service, rather than by self-important lording over others.

It must not rest upon a unilateral hierarchy of some parties over others, in this case men over women. Rather, it must be governed by the duty of the strong to regard and protect the weak.

It must be governed by the expectation that the more prominent members of the body accord special honour to those who are less prominent, and the responsibility of each member of the body to recognise their need for the others.

[22 : 45] Finally, it must clearly operate in terms of the asymmetric mutuality that 1 Corinthians 11 upholds between men and women. If men are the heads and the guardians of the church, they will only perform their role adequately if they are guided by the awareness that the glory of the church rests primarily in its bridal character, most prominently represented in the women, whose modesty in their presentation and speech in the gathered assembly awaits the eschatological unveiling of glory, in which the faithful male guardians of the church will clearly be revealed to be self-effacing servants of a glory that is revealed most dazzlingly in the bride and her radiant daughters.

A question to consider. In what ways can a culture of politeness, decorum and good manners draw from Paul's teaching in this chapter? In what ways might Paul's concerns diverge from the concerns more typical of such a culture?