

Prayers

To God

Praise God using one or two well chosen words, perhaps of love, kindness, admiration or thanksgiving. Think about what you are saying as you praise Him.

For myself

What is going on in your soul right now? This is a cheeky question but an important one. Are you in touch with your feelings? Ask the Lord for His help and grace to enable you to spot what the Lord is saying and doing in your life and in the midst of the day right now, as it happens.

For others

Bless the world, dear Saviour, with Your presence
Bless the world, dear healer, with Your peace
Bless the world, dear creator, with Your power
Bless the world, dear guide, with Your roadmap
Bless the world, dear Lord, with Your leadership
Bless the world, dear Jesus, for evermore AMEN

Meditation

Almighty God:

If my mind is confused

Take me to place of understanding

If my heart is broken

Comfort me with Your unsurpassed love

If my strength is failing

Grant me with Your relief and healing

If my feelings are bruised

Touch me with Your Spirit's calm hand

If my life has been tested

Give me the sustenance and help I need

If my soul has been led astray

Lead me back to the pathways of peace

For You are my everything

My all, my wondrous life, my glorious end

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

²⁶ What then does this mean, fellow believers?

- When you assemble, each one has a hymn, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let everything be done to build up the church.
- ²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, let two or three speak at the most, one at a time, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no interpreter, this person should remain quiet in church and talk privately to God.
- ²⁹ Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others give an evaluation; ³⁰ but if a revelation is given to someone seated, the one speaking first should be silent. ³¹ You can all prophesy one by one, so everyone can learn and be encouraged; ³² for the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. ³³ For God is not a God of chaos but of order, as in all the churches of the saints.
- ³⁴ Women should keep quiet in church meetings. They are not allowed to talk, but should keep under control, as the law also says; ³⁵ and if they want to learn something, they should ask their husbands at home, for it is not right for a woman to talk in church.

³⁶ Now, did the word of God come first from you, or has it come to you alone? ³⁷ Those who claim prophetic and spiritual gifts will accept that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command, ³⁸ and those who do not accept this will be ignored.

³⁹ So, fellow believers, strive to prophesy, but do not forbid speaking in tongues; ⁴⁰ and let all things be done properly and in good order.

Review

We are now towards the end of a fascinating chapter of 1 Corinthians, in which Paul has already described the worship of the church as fundamentally prophetic in nature (14:1-25). Moreover, he has insisted on some practical guidelines for the public use of the gift of tongues, strongly advocating that this should be interpreted so that people can hear the resulting prophetic word and be *'built up'* (14:5,12 etc.).

As Paul now concludes this chapter, he adds some summary advice about worship. First some general comments about the constituent parts of worship (14:26), second some advice about tongues and interpretation (14:27,28), third advice about prophecy in worship (14:29-33), and fourth a controversial comment about women speaking in church (14:34-35). Then, after insisting that he speaks with authority (14:36-38), he concludes with some final comments about prophesy and tongues, and adds the famous and frequently quoted guideline for all worship, that it be done *'properly and in good order'* (14:39,40).

You will see I have used bullet points in the translation, and may wonder why. We are used to reading the Bible with the verses condensed together so printers in the past could get the whole Bible on as few pages as possible. But we are now free from these limitations, and there is no reason why we cannot use every layout tool available for normal translation, including lists or bullet points where they either exist or are implied in the Biblical text. Here, I feel the bullet points bring out Paul's message with clarity, under his general heading *'then what does this mean'* (14:26). These 'bullet points' therefore contain Paul's summary advice about church worship. Some relate to what Paul has already written, but some contain important new information, and require our careful attention, and this is made all the more clear by the use of bullet points.

Worship as contribution (14:26)

The first 'bullet point' is the rest of verse 26, and is a general summary of worship, as relevant today as when it was first written. The principle Paul is advocating is that worship consists of the contributions of those who come to it. He expects that each one who comes to worship has both the privilege and duty to contribute something, and not merely turn up! He lists some contributions; *'a hymn, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation'*. How potentially liberating! Most worship today does not take place today unless preachers and worship leaders organise it all beforehand! Paul's vision here is quite different, and challenges every believer to be very specifically ready!

Before we dismiss such ideas as anarchic, we should take account of Paul's main themes here. First, he insists that everything be done to 'build up' the church (14:4,12,26), and second, he calls for all things to be done properly and with good order (14:40). Certainly, early Christian worship was not anarchic, the leadership was not so much 'up front', as behind the scenes, making sure that all contributions to worship were offered appropriately and in good order. Paul's next two 'bullet points' give an insight into what he means.

The use of tongues in worship, and interpretation (14:27,28)

Verses 27 and 28 recap the need for the interpretation of tongues when used in public worship (see 14:5,13). Notice, however, that Paul now adds a warning, which is perhaps an example of how a leader might deal someone who had come to worship to offer a 'tongue'. His principle is this; *'if there is no interpreter, this person should remain quiet in church and talk privately to God'* (14:28), and we can imagine Paul whispering this in the ear someone who was thinking of speaking in tongues. But with no one present to interpret, he asks this person to keep quiet for the good of all and *'talk privately to God'*! Of course, he was able to do this without compromising the worship because other people had come with their different contributions.

Proactive prophetic worship! (14:29-33)

Now the third bullet point is more interesting and complex, requiring a leader to be proactive in the Spirit during worship. The scene Paul paints is this; several people are giving prophetic words in order, but he recommends that *'others ... give an evaluation'* (14:29); so other prophets may comment on the prophecies given! Is Paul advising a sermon critique within a service? Second, he insists that if someone *'seated'* has some new word to offer, the one speaking should give way (14:30), thus honouring the movement of the Spirit in worship. There is no room here for prima donna preachers who should never be challenged or interrupted! Paul puts it this way; *'the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets'* (14:32), so every prophet understands they must accept assessment. When Paul says, *'God is not a God of chaos but of order'* (14:33), he is calling for discipline and submission amongst all who contribute to worship.

Women speaking in church meetings - be careful! (14:34-36)

Verses 34 and 35 are controversial; Paul says, *'women should keep quiet in church meetings'* and we have been arguing about this ever since! However, there is no doubt that first, male domination was more endemic in the first century than today, and second, the Bible suggests that the early church was far less afflicted by this sin (Gen 2:16) than the rest of society (e.g. Gal 3:28). So to be dogmatic about women not speaking in church today would be to miss the point.

If we look at what Paul says about women in worship elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, we get a border picture; in 11:4,5, for example, he assumes it normal that both men and women 'prophesy' in public worship, so he can hardly change his mind here! This suggests that something different is at the heart of this passage. In the early days of the church, women were liberated to attend worship with men, when in Jewish worship or pagan worship they were separated and kept apart. They would talk amongst themselves while the men 'worshipped'. So it is likely that Paul's command here is not designed to stop women bring their contributions to worship, it is to tell them that now they are allowed to worship with men, then should stop their habit of talking in worship! This is the only interpretation of this passage that makes sense, and it is relevant to us, because some make a habit of talking or playing with games on mobile phones during worship today. Paul is saying, 'stop doing this'!

Paul's claim to prophecy - he is happy to be judged as a prophet (14:37-40)

As ever, Paul remains confident that what he has written is God's Word. He is happy for other prophets to judge what he says (14:37), and he is also content that those who oppose him will have no hearing within the church. The Holy Spirit is either with him or it is not. We should be so bold!

Paul's final words are often quoted in defence of a strict line on church liturgy or practice; *'let all things be done properly and in good order'* (14:40). But here, Paul is referring to things such as people contributing in worship, and multiple prophets speaking and giving way to each other! We should be cautious, for this Scripture should not be used to dampen the movement of God's Spirit to enliven and build up the church in worship!

Discipleship

Application

Contributing to worship?

Why is it that so many people go to worship without anything to bring except themselves, and unless others have organised it all, they would not know what to do! I know well that to do what Paul envisages here would seem threatening to many, and some would be genuinely horrified at the idea of worship that was not pre-organised or prescribed by an office of the church!

Neither is it of use having 'free' worship with the gifts of the Spirit exercised, and then letting someone preach in western style without fear of contradiction. None of this reflects the advice of this Scripture about worship!

The best example of freedom in worship that reflects this Biblical model can be found at least in Africa, where I have witnessed services where this does indeed happen, and leaders of worship are not seem, but supervise the contributions of people as one stands to read, lead a song, give a word, and much more.

Prophets being subject to prophets

If you try and tell some preachers they should submit to critique and assessment, they will not have it. I have heard preachers say 'I am answerable to God' and claim God has spoken to them, as if above all contradiction! This is appalling and unscriptural, and where it happens, God's Word is not proclaimed, only human ideas and personal egos. God's way is very, very different. It has been set out here, and I suggest we use what Paul says for our benefit.

Ideas for what to do

- *When you next go to worship, think beforehand about what you are bringing. Do you bring money as an offering? Do you bring anything else in particular, and if so, what, and why?*
- *Pray for the gift of prophecy so that you may contribute to worship something of God's Word*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. *How does this passage help us understand worship, and what does it teach us?*
2. *What can we learn about prophecy from this passage?*
3. *Why does Paul ask women not to speak or talk in worship?*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, save us from being unwilling to enter into worship, from standing back when others sing and dance, from refusing to speak when others give testimony, from thinking private thoughts while others are praying. Draw us into true worship, and lead us into Your presence, for Your glory we pray: **AMEN**