

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Bring calmness and strength to my soul, O Lord.  
Give me patience to wait for answers to prayer,  
Courage to face tough times and difficult choices,  
Perseverance to discover the truth behind what happens,  
And a heart that is always ready to call on You for help.  
Thank You Lord God Almighty: AMEN.

### Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: HEALING

**1. For yourself**

*Pray for yourself, bearing in mind the fact that you are aging. People do not like to think about this, but aging affects all people. Submit your feelings about this to the Lord*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Pray for any of your friends and family who are aging and especially those whose health is failing*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Pray for your church and its ministry to the elderly and frail*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*One measure of a society is how it cares for those who are dying. Pray about the way your own country provides for the dying; pray that God's people will lead the way in showing how the elderly and dying can be given love and respect*

### Meditation

Turn, O Lord, and save us: *(Psalm 6:4)*

Save this planet from the cruel exploitation of its resources,  
From the sins of corruption whereby those who control these things  
Gain immense riches at the expense of us all - who pay the price.

Save this world from the spiritual nonsense taught by some  
That all religions have equal worth, so each can have a personal god,  
And faith in Jesus Christ is no more than a mere 'lifestyle choice'.

Save us from the idolatries of 'today', of selfishness and greed,  
The lack of respect given to others, especially the young and the old,  
And those of different sex, culture, age and social background.

Save us from the gods of self that rule the little worlds in which we live  
And deceive us into thinking we know everything, when truly, we are  
Nothing more than armchair experts with little knowledge of our world.

O Lord, re-create humanity, for the sake of humanity!

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## Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

<sup>26</sup> 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 in order to build up the church. <sup>27</sup> If anyone speaks in a tongue, permit two or three at the most, one at a time, and someone must interpret. <sup>28</sup> But if there is no interpreter, let that one keep quiet in church and speak to himself and to God. <sup>29</sup> Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others give an evaluation; <sup>30</sup> but if a revelation is given to someone who is seated, let the one who was speaking first be silent. <sup>31</sup> You should all be able to prophesy one by one, so that everyone may learn and be encouraged; <sup>32</sup> even the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets, <sup>33</sup> since God is not a God of disorder but of order, as in all the churches of the saints.

<sup>34</sup> Women should be quiet in the churches. They must not speak, but should submit to authority, as the law also says. <sup>35</sup> If there is something they want to learn, they must ask their husbands privately, at home, since it is improper for a woman to speak in church.

<sup>36</sup> Now, did the word of God come originally from you? Or has it reached you alone? <sup>37</sup> Anyone who claims to be a prophet or to have spiritual gifts, must accept that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.

<sup>38</sup> If anyone does not accept this, he will not be accepted. <sup>39</sup> Therefore, fellow believers, strive to prophesy, but do not forbid speaking in tongues; <sup>40</sup> and let all things be done properly and in good order.

## Review

This fascinating passage of scripture stands at the climax of chapter 14, and it presents us with some remarkable teaching about worship. It is a highly significant passage of Scripture, and it deserves our fullest attention. This may surprise you, however, because most people are drawn immediately to what it says in verses 34 and 35, which seems to deny women the right to contribute to worship by speaking. As a whole, however, it offers us much more, so we should not be blinded by its controversies to the point of failing to grasp what it says about Christian worship.

Almost everything Paul says about women in the church is contentious! You may recall that in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, we discovered that although the passage appears to demand that women wear headscarves in worship, his point is in fact different. Unfortunately, the Greek sentence has been misunderstood, for in fact, Paul tells women to wear what they deem right, given their obligation to ensure they cause no offence. Something similar has happened here. Paul's provocative comment '*women should keep quiet in the churches ... they must not speak*' (14:34) sounds awful, as does his call to women to learn from their husbands at home. But his point is in fact rather different from what we imagine, and we must consider what it was like to worship in the first century AD if we are to get Paul's point.

For centuries, women had been barred from worshipping with men, whether in Judaism or in pagan worship. They were used to being separated in worship, and having little to do except talk while the men engaged in worship. Now a revolution had taken place in the early Christian church, and women were increasingly allowed to worship with their men; as Paul himself said, God knows no boundaries, Greek or Jew, male or female (Gal 3:28). However, it appears that amongst the excesses of the Corinthian church, women were talking to each other during worship. So, consistent with his teaching here about good order in worship, Paul therefore calls on the women to refrain from talking; instead, they should discuss their new faith and their new liberties at home (14:35). The annoyance in Paul's tone at this point does not show antagonism towards women, as some think, but rather his passion to ensure discipline in public worship, so that all could take part in it (14:26-33).

With this straightened out, we can focus on Paul's teaching here about good order in the church. The passage begins with Paul strongly advocating an orderly approach to worship (14:26-33); his point is made both at the beginning in verse 26 and at the end in verse 33. As far as he is concerned, the use of the spiritual gifts in worship is to be expected, including tongues (14:39), but certainly not used in a 'free for all' of people doing what they want!

Paul paints a picture of worship in which a leader exercises a ministry of guidance and wise control, enabling each one to make his or her own contribution to the common worship (14:26). This is revolutionary! It is a picture far removed from the worship organised by mainstream churches today, large or small. Most worship is managed largely in advance by one person or perhaps by a small group. Everything is performed for the benefit of the worshippers, who worship not through their own individually recognisable contribution, but by joining in the singing and listening!

Paul gives this advice because he is concerned that worship should be intelligible, which is why he calls for all 'tongues' to be interpreted (14:29). He wants the church to be built up through people understanding what God is saying during worship, and he does not want worship to become like the uncontrolled, noisy and emotionally manipulative worship of pagan gods! As he describes how a worship service can be constructed from individual participation (14:26-32), his picture of worship gives each individual a distinctive role in exercising their own spiritual gifts. Everything is held together indirectly by leaders who make sure that things are done '*decently and in good order*' (14:40). Paul chastises the Corinthians for thinking they can do what they want in worship, and he calls on them to imitate their God in creating 'order' out of 'chaos' (14:33).

Paul does not offer an exact blueprint for worship in this important passage of Scripture, but he paints a picture that is very different from the worship most of us experience Sunday by Sunday. For all our emphasis on good order, there are few worshipping congregations today in which those who attend come ready to contribute their individual gifts of the Spirit. I wonder who will take this passage seriously and begin to put this Scripture into practice?

## Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Background
- The general instructions about worship
- Problems with verses 34 and 35, and their meaning
- Order in the church!

### **Notes on the translation of the passage**

#### **V26 'let everything be done in order to build up the church.'**

The Greek says '... for building up', but this is too vague in English, so we add the subject of the sentence, which is the gathered assembly of God's people, i.e. the church.

#### **V28 'let that one keep quiet in church ...'**

The Greek says 'let him keep quiet', but again, it is best to include the subject of the phrase, and this is the one who speaks in a tongue.

#### **V29 'let the others give an evaluation'**

The Greek word used here means 'evaluate, judge, discern, or dispute.'

#### **V30 'let the one who was speaking first ...'**

The Greek lacks the word 'speaking', but we must include it in English to make sense of the sentence.

#### **V32 'even the spirits of prophets'**

You may wonder why I have written 'even' at the beginning of the sentence. The Greek word that joins the sentences here (the conjunction 'kai') can mean a wide variety of things according to the circumstances. In this instance, 'even' makes the best sense, because the following phrase is a significant comment on what has just been said.

#### **V33 'God is not a God of disorder but of order'**

Most Bible versions translate this 'not ... of disorder but of peace'. The Greek word does indeed mean peace, but it is a word with a wide range of meaning and when used adjacent to 'disorder, it usually means 'order' and this is its natural meaning here.

#### **V33 'as in all the churches of the saints.'**

Most translations include this as part of what comes next. However, if this is the case, the same phrase 'in the churches' is repeated in the same sentence, and this would be most odd. For this reason, I suggest that it is part of the end of what has just been said and not part of what comes next.

#### **V34 'they must ask their husbands privately, at home.'**

The Greek says 'they must ask their own husbands at home', however, the words 'their own' seem superfluous, for they had no other husbands 'at home'. There are some indications that the expressions used here were one way of saying 'privately', and even though this colloquialism is not absolutely certain, it gives the better translation here and does not change the essential meaning of the text.

#### **V35 'since it is improper for a woman to speak in church.'**

Most translations present this as a standalone sentence 'it is improper for a woman to speak ...' However, it is joined to the verse before it with a word meaning 'since, for, then, or indeed'. In this way, we must say that it is incorrect to suggest that this is a command of Paul's. This is a comment in the midst of a rather complex and heated debate (see study).

### **V37 'spiritual gifts'**

You will find that many Bible versions have 'spiritual powers' or 'spiritual things'. The Greek words 'pneumatikos' does refer to 'spiritual things, but in this general passage of Paul's writing, it universally refers to 'spiritual gifts, and it would be strange if it did not mean this here, as it does in 12:1, 14:1.

### **V38 'if anyone does not accept this, he is not to be accepted.'**

Some Bible versions suggest 'but if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant' (as in the NKJV). However, this is strong language, but the translation follows on from what is said in verse 37, and it is about wilfully accepting or not accepting things as the word of God, not merely being ignorant of it.

Although I have attempted to explain some of the reasoning behind what I have said about this highly contentious text, only the details will suffice for a proper explanation of what is going on here. There are a number of reasons why this passage is not well understood, not least the fact that scholars are unsure about whether verse 34 and 35 are in fact a part of the letter! My opinion is that it is, but the debate helps us understand why the passage about women is important.

### **Background**

Paul's instruction to share everything equally in worship (14:26) stands at the head of this passage, which is clearly one 'unit' within Paul's letter. Each contribution to the worship of God's people should be offered for the express purpose of building up the church, and Paul's assumption is that everyone comes to worship with something to share. 'Each one' has something, he says, and the picture he presents suggests that the leader does not have to structure the whole worship beforehand. The leadership role is to invite everyone attending to contribute what they have brought and make sure this is done in an orderly fashion. This is so radically different from what is practiced in most churches today as to present us with a clear challenge. Certainly, relatively few go to church today with something to offer within worship, that is, apart from worship leaders, preachers, musicians and those who have particular duties to perform, such as working a computer or projector, welcoming people, and making the worship area presentable, for example. On special events, some may be invited to take a special part, but a general openness to participation in worship is rare.

It is worth reminding ourselves of what Paul was doing by speaking in this way about order and building up the church. Paul came from a background of worship within Judaism, in which usually, everything was highly structured. However, this was only true for men. Women had a minimal role in the synagogue, and largely went to accompany their husbands and to talk in the synagogue courtyards where they were allowed to congregate, separate from where the prayers and the readings of scripture were conducted. In the Gentile Roman world Paul sought to evangelise, he would have become familiar with people worshipping gods in a wide variety of ways. Typically, when people came together in large numbers, the adoration of the gods could be noisy, highly reckless and extreme, and reminiscent of what we might call 'mass hysteria'. The role of men and women was different (as is evident in the Middle East and other countries to this day); men performed formal rituals, and women made the accompanying noise, often called 'ululating', a piercing and haunting noise that was regarded as synonymous with 'spiritual' presence'. Such 'ululating' was not common in Israel, but there are references to it in the 'wailing' at funeral rites, in which the Greek word used is 'alaladzo' (see Mark 5:38, Jeremiah 4:8, 32:34 etc. and also in Paul's reference to the noisy worship – 1 Cor. 13:1).

### **The general instructions about worship**

Paul sought to teach the young Gentile congregations of the early church, such as those at Corinth, that there was merit in worshipping God not by getting excited, but by a sincere and honest encounter with the living God. Gifts of the Spirit including tongues and prophecy were the closest that the early church came to the pagan worship with which many were familiar, and so Paul gave instructions that said everything should be done in an orderly fashion, to build up the church (14:26).

The extent of Paul's instructions are remarkable. Essentially, he gives a limit of two or three people speaking in tongues, and says that even these should not be used if those who speak cannot be sure that someone will interpret. There is no room within worship here for spontaneous outbursts, unless some thought has been exercised beforehand about who might interpret and whether it builds up the church! The command about when to 'keep quiet' is clear and emphatic, and comes with a suggestion for an appropriate spiritual suggestion; to think and 'speak to God' (14:28)!

The instruction to prophets is remarkably similar (14:29), suggesting two or three should speak, in order, and that the one speaking should give way to anyone else who has a 'revelation' (14:30). It is impossible to imagine how this can work unless the one speaking is able to accept that what others have to say may be more important than their own 'prophecy'. This is a requirement of humility, and perhaps a very necessary one, placed on what Paul regarded as the most important and significant of gifts. His final comment here is important; 'the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets'; for this reminds us that he expected a group of Christians to have many people who prophesied, and did so in a spirit of accountability. The idea that out of one large congregation, perhaps one person just might give a prophetic word unchallenged by anyone else and revered by the entire congregation, did not enter his thoughts. He would probably be horrified that only one had spoken!

### ***Problems with verses 34 and 35, and their meaning***

There is evidence within the earliest manuscripts of this letter that people were uncertain about verses 34 and 35. In one early copy, the scribe has indicated these verses in a footnote, as if to warn the reader that this section was not to be read in public. To this day, if you read any books about Corinthians written by theologians of every theological perspective including evangelical, most suggest strongly that these verses are not part of the original letter. However, they cannot tie down the theological and literary arguments (to do with style of writing, for example), and yet say categorically that it is not, and so they are forced to leave the these verses where they are and discuss its contents! The best explanation of this uncertainty is that it has arisen simply because people have struggled to understand it well.

It is commonly accepted today that most of the problems with these verses arise when people read them with a predisposed belief in the subordination of women in the life of the church. If people hold this belief, it can be hard to persuade them to look at the text in a detached manner, and see it from the perspective of Paul and the culture to which he addressed it. If we are willing to do this, then his instruction to women to 'be quiet' (14:34) is quite literally no stronger a command than to the prophet (14:30) and the one who speaks in a tongue (14:28), to do the same. The reason for the comment is given in the next verse which says 'they must not speak, but should submit to authority, as the Law also says' (14:34). Now, the women, who were separated from the men according to the custom of the day, were used to being able to speak and discuss things at will; but consistent with his desire that all should participate in worship in an orderly fashion, Paul said 'they must not speak'. He wanted them to be quiet in order to take part in worship, rather than chatting during worship!

Moving on, the next phrase, '... should submit to authority' is different from every other mention of the phrase 'submit to authority' in the Bible, because it does not say what authority the woman should submit to! Husbands are mentioned later, but not in this sentence, and we can only guess that Paul means 'the Law', because it is what he mentions next. Importantly, there is no command in the Old Testament anywhere for women to be subject to the authority of men. Genesis 3:16 is sometimes said to confirm this reading of the text, but it simply explains that women will be dominated by men; it does not require them to remain in submission!

In verse 35, Paul suggests, in a manner that seems offensive to so many, but in the context of his day is incredibly liberating, that if the women felt that they did not understand properly what was happening in church, they should 'ask their husbands privately, at home'. How would they know what to do in ordered worship, when from either a Gentile or a Jewish background, they had never been involved in the actual worship of God before? Their past had been gossiping or 'ululating' to raise the spirit of the gods; now they could no longer do this, they needed instruction. Why anyone today should have a problem with people learning at home about the spiritual things of God is a mystery, for by so saying, Paul placed an obligation on men to share with their wives the things of God! Some have argued that this command constitutes the first document in history that speaks of the empowerment of women and the duty of men to ensure that they 'learn'. This may well be the case, but as far as Paul was concerned, it was all about worship. His last comment in this verse was to reiterate that the reason for this was that 'speaking' in church was improper. He wanted women to take part in the leadership and participation of all the worship, with the men (as is clear from the rest of Corinthians), and not chattering, ululating or making any noise that would stop the orderly progression of worship.

Paul's infamous comments about women speaking in church cannot and should not be generalised to suggest that they should never take part in worship or leadership. The text simply does not say this.

### ***Order in the church!***

It does seem that Paul was quite annoyed about what was happening in the Corinthian church, but it is hard to try and 'construct' what may have been happening. In the course of the letter, we have found evidence of splits and factions that were evident at the Lord's Supper, for example. Perhaps there were divisions about what the women should do in church; maybe some involved themselves in ululating as they had done in their past, and others argued about this believing it to be wrong; we do not know, but it is easy to imagine. Paul

appears to be upset that any one party of the church would claim to know what women should or should not do in worship, because his next comment expressed frustration; 'did the Word of God come originally from you? Or has it reached you alone?' (14:36). Paul boldly claimed his apostolic authority to tell the Corinthians the truth of God's Word about order in the church. This was his theme, not subjugating women.

The truth of this is made clear immediately in the last few verses (14:37-40), in which Paul went back over the theme he had built up, and called for people to accept his teaching. At the end, he stated for the third time that all things should be done 'properly and in good order' (14:40). Before this, however, he appealed to the prophets and those with 'spiritual gifts' (14:37) to accept what he said as a 'command from the Lord', insisting that there was no way out of this responsibility to God's commands (14:38). Lastly, he emphasised that the right thing was not to avoid either tongues or prophecy because of the discipline he felt it necessary to command. It was his desire that all God's people be familiar with these gifts being used actively in worship.

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## Discipleship

### Application

It is often said that there is not much said in the New Testament about worship, and what should be done in a Christian worship service. This is clearly not true. If we re-construct what Paul expected from Christian worship here in this passage, he expected the singing of hymns, teaching, revelations from the Lord, tongues, interpretation and prophecy. All of these he appears to have expected to be 'brought' by worshippers rather than organised in advance or according to some liturgy. It is likely that leaders did organise the reading of scripture and prayers on a regular basis because that is the synagogue model on which Christian worship was based, but the other elements mentioned in this passage appear to be added to this. Is it not liberating to think of the leaders being empowered to deal with the reading and exposition of scripture and the prayers, and everyone else having the right and duty to bring and use all the other features of worship? It sounds like a pattern of doing things that has possibilities for today, but is hardly ever achieved!

When I was a missionary, I was a chaplain to a school in Zimbabwe. I held the formal school services on a Sunday morning in a largely Western style, as the school expected. In the afternoon, the many Zimbabwean pupils who were Christian held their own 'services' with the permission of the Headmaster, and I was a welcome guest. I observed there some worship that was as near to this model as I have ever experienced. The leaders organised the scripture reading and the preaching, and some of the prayers (which I was sometimes asked to take). In between times, people milled around and sang and worshipped in a hall with only a few chairs. Everything was done together and there was no chaos, but it was hard to understand why one song, prophecy, tongue, or in some cases a prayer for healing, would suddenly become the focus of the whole worshipping group. Then I perceived that the leaders milled around with everyone else, and as they did so, people told them what they wished to contribute, and the leaders would tap them on the shoulder if they wished them to lead off with whatever it was they wished to contribute. Moreover, everyone was respectful of whatever happened next, and the leaders were often almost invisible! This happened in 1985, and it was the only time that I have seen this model of worship practiced. Frankly, it was more responsive, liberating and scriptural than any recent Western 'style' of worship I have ever attended.

This worship was offered by young people in Africa, long before young people's conventions in the West threw out chairs and danced in praise to the sound of 'performance worship' songs! In addition, my wife also experienced very similar worship in interdenominational prayer meetings in Eire in the mid 70's. I wish we felt confident enough to learn even now from all those people.

### Questions for groups

1. Discuss your experience of speaking in tongues in the life of the church, and whether it has been done as this text suggests is right?
2. How can a worship leader make sure that everyone keeps things done properly within worship?
3. Have you ever witnessed someone giving a prophecy and stopping to allow someone else to give a message or revelation from God? Can this work?

### Discipleship challenges

- *Imagine for a moment what you would feel like if you were giving a word of prophecy, perhaps preaching, and someone else nearby began to speak. What would you feel about stopping to give them priority? This is the humility God wishes us to have when speaking in worship!*
  - *Pray for those who find it hard to engage with the worship of God's people in church, and who need further help in enabling them to appreciate the order and godliness of what happens.*
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## **Final Prayer**

Lord of all, carry away the burdens of our sin, we pray. Take them far from us and remove them to where they will no longer tempt us. We ask this boldly, knowing that Jesus died because of our sin, and confident in the knowledge that this work is Your saving will, Lord God. AMEN

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