

## When You Come Together

Sometimes I wish there were a way to transcend space and time and experience what it's like to be a different person or live in a different time and place. For example, I'd like to know exactly what my mother thinks and feels as she lives in her world of dementia and Parkinson's Disease. It would be uncomfortable and eye-opening to experience what it's like to live as a person with a race, gender, or culture different than my own. Thinking about the biblical stories we're hearing today; I'd like to know exactly what Moses felt and thought as he encountered God and received his assignment to lead his people out of slavery. I'd like to worship with the Corinthian church and know what it was like to hear Paul's letter with its words of rebuke, encouragement, and instruction. Through technology these days, we are able to participate in a variety of virtual experiences, but there are still many we can only attempt to understand through observation, story, and research.

We read the entire first six chapters of 1 Corinthians when we began our study of Paul's letter last month. Since then we've been reading shorter sections and skipping around a bit. But in order to more accurately understand what was happening in the church and what was on Paul's mind when he wrote the letter, we must continue to look at the letter as a whole. And, as much as possible, we must attempt to read his words with 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek or Roman eyes instead of with 21<sup>st</sup> century American ones.

Let's look at where today's scripture fits into the letter. 1 Corinthians could be divided into five main parts plus some final words:<sup>1</sup> (1) Divisions – chapters 1-4; (2) Sexual Integrity – chapters 5-7; (3) Food (specifically, food offered to idols) – chapters 8-10; (4) Worship – chapters 11-14; (5) The Resurrection – chapter 15; plus final words in Chapter 16.

Paul states the purpose of his letter early in the first chapter: *Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.*<sup>2</sup> We need to keep this purpose in mind as we read everything else.

Today's passage is part of Paul's discussion of issues relating to worship.<sup>3</sup> It appears that the church gatherings were rather chaotic, so he addresses issues of decorum in worship.

First, he discusses proper covering or uncovering of the head when praying or prophesying.<sup>4</sup> He gives instructions to both men and women about their appearance when they participate in the gatherings. Note that he assumes both men and women will be speaking during worship.

Next, he responds to reports of drunkenness, gluttony, and class discrimination at the Lord's Supper.<sup>5</sup> He rebukes the wealthy, powerful members of the assembly and talks about the proper way to ensure that all members are valued and included.

Paul's longest discussion concerns the manifestations of the Spirit in public worship. He lists the varieties of gifts allotted to each member and activated by the Spirit, all to be used to build up the church,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bibleproject.com/explore/1-corinthians/>

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10, NRSV

<sup>3</sup> This discussion draws from the Bible Project, <https://bibleproject.com/explore/1-corinthians/>; Richard B. Hayes, *Interpretation: First Corinthians*, John Knox Press, 1997, pp. 233-252; and Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2017, pp. 298-316.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

the body of Christ.<sup>6</sup> He reminds them that the greatest gift of all is love.<sup>7</sup> Then, he embarks on a lengthy discussion of the gifts of prophecy and tongues.<sup>8</sup> He concludes this section with the words we read today – instructions about orderly worship.<sup>9</sup>

From Paul’s description of how worship should be conducted, we can imagine what might have been the current situation. There were some people who were having powerful spiritual experiences during the gathering. They would start praying out loud in unknown languages. There were other people who would start sharing a word from God. Then someone else would interrupt them because they wanted to share. All these people talking at once, some of them using words no one understood, was confusing and chaotic. It distracted people, especially visitors, from hearing the gospel.

What, then, should happen when they come together? Paul summarizes his instructions in two sentences. First, *each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation*. This isn’t a complete listing of activities. We know their gatherings also included Scripture reading, preaching and the Lord’s Supper. He doesn’t say anything about the sequence of these events or about leadership. He does say that everyone is expected to contribute to the worship experience as they are led by the Spirit of God.

Second, Paul says *let all things be done for building up*. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses this building language twenty times when talking about the faith community. He calls them to his goal of building up the community throughout the whole letter. Remember, he named this expectation in his thesis statement, *that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose*.

Paul follows his general directive with several specific instructions about how many people can speak, in which order, and in what manner. Everything should be done to build up the faith community, and it should be done with control and dignity, for *God is a God not of disorder but of peace*. As one commentator states, “The character of one’s deity is reflected in the character of one’s worship.”<sup>10</sup> The God who made order out of chaos in creation, whose mission is to establish peace in the world, must not be worshipped in disorder and unrestraint.

This whole discussion brings to mind the two presidential debates that happened this fall. In the first one, both candidates and the moderator talked over each other so much that it was difficult – and often impossible – to hear what anyone was saying. In the second debate, new guidelines allowed the viewers to hear the moderator’s questions and the candidates’ answers as well as their questions for and responses to each other. Of course, there wasn’t any “building each other up” during the debate. It was all about tearing each other down. That’s the nature of political debates. It shouldn’t be the nature of the church.

Back to 1 Corinthians. The passage in chapter 14 about orderly worship contains a rather abrupt interjection commanding women not to speak during the gatherings. This stands in stark contrast to what Paul writes earlier, in chapter 11, when he teaches that women may pray and prophesy in church as long as they keep their heads properly covered. There is a fair amount of evidence that these verses were not part of Paul’s original letter but added later. In a few weeks we’re having a guest preacher who will be talking about Corinthian women. I expect she’ll have more to say on this subject.

Paul ends his discussion of worship by stating that *all things should be done decently and in order*. He was concerned that the Corinthians were being disorderly in their worship. I wonder what he would write to the Christian churches in Salina today. More specifically, what would he write to us, to Salina

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 12

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 13

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

<sup>10</sup> Gordon D. Fee.

Mennonite Church? Have we overlearned the principle of orderliness? Would Paul advise us to be more free in worship? I wonder.

While the settings and circumstances are different, some of Paul's principles about worship in the Corinthian church are relevant to us. First and foremost, worship is for building community; it's not just for the benefit of each individual participant. When we worship, we are in relationship with God, of course, and we are also in relationship with each other. Worship, Paul insists, isn't just a time for private spiritual blessings; it's a time for the members of the community to share God's gifts with each other so that everyone may learn and be encouraged. Many voices should be heard, of all ages, genders, and abilities. For each of us, that sometimes means giving up what I think would be right for "me" in favor of what is right for "us."

The priority of building up the body is why we've worked so hard during the last six months to be able to connect and interact with each other during worship whether we're in the building or in our homes. At the beginning, I realize you heard much more from me than from anyone else, but I hope that has changed and will continue to change as time goes on. Don't hesitate to let me know if you would like to lead worship, read scripture, preach, or contribute something else to worship.

Second, worship should be open to visitors. Worship needs to be sensitive to their ability to understand and participate. It shouldn't be exclusive or understandable only to "insiders." This principle is a difficult one to follow during a pandemic. We wouldn't turn away visitors who come to our building on a Sunday morning as long as they follow the health guidelines we've established. But I'm reluctant to publicize the Zoom link on our website or Facebook page. What would Paul say about that?

Third, worship should engage participants both emotionally and intellectually. There are different learning styles so worship ought to include a variety of ways for people to connect with God and with each other. We might think of this as engaging our brains and our hearts through a variety of ways including words, music, visuals, actions, and silence. I hope each of you finds something that connects with your emotions and intellect during worship.

Fourth, proclamation of the gospel is important in worship. This happens through storytelling, scripture reading, and preaching. It's important for building up, encouraging, and consoling those who are already part of the faith community, and for reaching and teaching those who are not. At the same time, proclamation needs to be tested. Worship should include ways for people to say "Amen" or "Yes, but" or even "That's wrong" to the preacher and the congregation. Early Anabaptists valued this principle so highly that they dubbed it the "rule of Paul." They believed that Scripture is best interpreted in and by the community of believers as a whole. Worship ought to include a way for this to happen. I welcome your responses each week.

Fifth, there should be room in worship for welcoming the Spirit in spontaneous ways. Orderly worship includes prepared prayers, songs, responses, confessions, Scripture readings, sermon, and rituals. But it also needs to leave room for "new things" that God wants to do and say. I wonder if our worship allows for that. I wonder how open I am to spontaneous eruptions.

There may be other principles we could add to this list, but I'll stop with five. My hope is that each time we come together for worship, each person has the sense that they are contributing to worship by their presence, whether or not they speak. I pray that all things will be done for building up, for strengthening the life and faith of the community. In these unusual times, it's ironic that the best way to come together for worship is to separate ourselves physically from each other. It's a gift of the Spirit, that even with physical distancing, we are able to function as one body, the part of God's church known as Salina Mennonite.

Thanks be to God!