

WHEN YOU COME TOGETHER

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning we will be discussing, in Chapter 14 of First Corinthians, beginning with Verse 26, the answer to a question many are asking today: "When is the church really a church? Is it a church when it is gathering like this on Sunday morning, or is it still a church when it is scattered out in the highways and byways, in homes, in offices, in apartments, and shops?"

If you think, as many do, of the church as existing only when it comes together on Sunday mornings or other times, you have to ask, "How many people does it take to make a church?" Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them," {Matt 18:20}. That seems to me to constitute the very fundamentals of a church, so that even two or three Christians gathered together and thinking about the work of the kingdom of God is a church in action.

It is very hard to define a church, especially a local church, in the New Testament concept. It is almost like nailing jello to the wall! Every time you think you have grasped it, it slips between your fingers. But one thing is clear from the biblical accounts, and that is, the early church met together. From the earliest times, Christians felt that urge to meet together and share together, with brothers and sisters in the family of God. And when you ask, "What did they do when they met?" the answer, of course, is: They began to minister to one another, they shared their spiritual gifts, they exercised what God had given them for each other's benefit.

Verse 26 describes that very procedure:

What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. {1 Cor 14:26 RSV}

We do not know how large the church at Corinth was. Perhaps by this time, several years after it had begun, it was of considerable size -- possibly several hundred people had been converted and were meeting together. If so, it would have been difficult, perhaps, to always allow everyone to have a part. We know that shortly after Pentecost the early church in Jerusalem consisted of as many as 10,000 members. Now obviously, they would have had great difficulty finding a place to meet with a church that large, and certainly, if they did, it would be impossible to let everyone have "a hymn, a lesson, a revelation." The meetings would probably *still* be going on, knowing how Christians tend to run on at times.

Obviously, this verse describes a smaller, home type of meeting where it was possible to have this kind of intimacy of sharing, and this universality of participation.

They seemed to have, then, two types of meetings in the 1st century, one in which, as described here, people met together in a small, intimate gathering in which they all could share with one another and exercise their spiritual gifts, but also there were large, informally conducted meetings where preachers would preach and teachers would teach the whole of the body and one or two people could exercise a spiritual gift to the whole body.

Such a meeting is described in the 20th chapter of Acts, where Paul met with all the Christians in the city of Troas. That famous meeting began probably around 9 o'clock at night, but Paul, we are told, "continued his speech until midnight," {Acts 20:7 KJV}. That was the occasion when a young man went to sleep as the apostle taught. (That has always been an encouragement to me!) This young man fell out the window, and Paul had to exercise a restoring ministry in his life. (This is why I have always appreciated the fact that the seats here at PBC are right on the ground level. I do not have the gift of healing, as Paul did.) But in either type of meeting, one thing was clearly evident: There was one purpose for getting together. Paul says, "Let all things be done for edification."

Now *edification* means more than simply teaching, or instruction of the mind; the word is larger than that. It means "to build people up." Getting together on Sunday morning here is an edifying thing.

I was feeling this afresh this morning as we concluded that excellent singing. There is a sense of excitement in our gathering here. What is it that brings you out on a rainy Sunday to fill this auditorium twice? Well, it is the feeling of being built up, edified, instructed, encouraged, comforted, uplifted. It does something for you, doesn't it? It starts the week out right. It cleanses away some of the cobwebs that have been gathering all through the previous week.

That is what the apostle is describing here. When Christians get together this ought to be the aim of the meeting, that everything that is done contributes to the understanding of the mind, the uplifting of the spirit, the encouraging of the heart. Thus it will be an edifying process involving growth, understanding, and exhortation to activity on the basis of an expectant attitude that God is going to be with you, and working through you all through the week. Now that is the basis of the church meeting in the early century, and it still is today.

In the next section, beginning with Verse 27 and on through almost to the end of the chapter, the apostle is going to deal with three problem areas in the church, the exercise of three gifts which create, or would tend to create, certain problems. And you will note, as we go through this, we certainly have a parallel to this today:

First, the matter of the exercise of the gift of tongues. We saw last week that tongues is the spiritual gift of praising God in a language that was never learned. Now, since its content is praise and rejoicing and thanksgiving, it is basically an emotional experience. So if the meeting gets too heavily involved in that area, it turns it into an emotional meeting. This is still the problem today. One of the dangers we have is that meetings will become too centered in the emotions.

I have been in meetings that were a riot of hand-clapping, shouting, singing, raising hands, and even dancing in the aisles. They were wild, emotional times. There are people today who think that that is the only kind of meeting that is of any value. They look forward to their weekly religious jag where they experience a kind of spiritual high to live on the rest of the week.

Now that is a problem, and Paul will deal with it here.

Then there is the matter of prophesying. Prophesying is the expounding of the mind of God with application to the specific problems of the day. It could tend, therefore, to a kind of over-theologizing which would turn the meeting into heaviness and dullness and profundity that would be over many people's heads. Therefore, as excellent a gift as prophesying was, it could be misused, and Paul is concerned about that. There are meetings like that today as well.

Third, there was the matter of the freedom of women to minister in the church. We want to say more about that because this is a highly controversial passage. But, as Paul will describe this, it tends to create, sometimes, a digression from the edifying process. It creates debate and division and dissension, and that created a problem in the church at Corinth.

Now we are not far removed from these things today. It is evident that we can be lost in the mystical, in the theological, or in the dialectical, whichever, it can take over a meeting, and that is what Paul is anxious to avoid. To do so, therefore, he suggests certain rules. "Oh," you say, "I don't like rules. They always tend to lay down heavy restrictions on people." Well, I do not like rules either. I basically resist rules, but I learned many years ago that you cannot function as a corporate body without some rules. You cannot play a game of football without rules; the rules make the game possible. You cannot play a game of chess without rules; you cannot drive through traffic without rules.

So certain fundamental rules are necessary, and now the apostle turns to those.

First, the matter of rules about tongues:

If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silence in church and speak to himself and to God. {1 Cor 14:27-28 RSV}

Three simple limits govern the matter of the exercise of the biblical gift of tongues.

First, only one or two should speak, that is all. In very exceptional cases, at the most the limit would be three. Why? Well, because it is an emotional experience, and too much emotion in a meeting is destructive. Too little is destructive too, but this is why the apostle is earnest about trying to regulate that so it is not too much of any good thing. Therefore, he says, only one or two, and they must speak in order. There is to be no duplication or multiplicity of speakers speaking all at once so that everyone may enjoy the ministry of tongues as it is limited to one or two.

Second, it must be interpreted. He seems to imply that one of those who spoke in these unlearned languages would be given the gift of interpretation, so he says, "let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret."

Third, if no one is able to interpret, then no one is to speak in tongues in the church because tongues must be interpreted for edification. The apostle makes that clear. That is why he seems to imply that one who speaks in a language ought to discover whether someone has the ability to interpret before he speaks. And if there is no one to interpret, then, Paul says, "let him speak to himself." That means to praise God in his spirit, in his thoughts, but not in words. Anyone can do that without disturbing a meeting.

Paul now turns to rules concerning prophesying.

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. {1 Cor 14:29-33a RSV}

Once again, three simple controls. Remember now, Paul has in view the small home type of meeting where there were probably no more than 10 or 12, or 20 people at the most, present so they could each take turns prophesying. But at any one meeting it was to be limited to one or two or three again, at the most. This was in order to prevent any lengthy meetings. When you prophesy you tend to take a little longer time; that is because you are explaining things. Preachers are notorious for being long-winded and this was to be, therefore, a limitation on the meeting. Some preachers have no terminal facilities; it is necessary to control them by artificial means, for the apostle is well aware of the truth of the saying, "The mind can absorb only what the seat can endure." So he was not allowing the meeting to go on in a protracted way.

Then the second rule was that prophesying should be examined: "Let the others weigh what is said." Prophesying is an attempt to expound and explain the mind of God. It is not covered under inspiration; everything a prophet says is not necessarily true. As Calvin said, it is the gift of explaining revelation, therefore, it is subject to the judgment and comment of others. In these small meetings in Corinth it was expected that somebody who spoke as a prophet would be subjected to the confirmation and the correction, if necessary, of others present.

The third limit was, let it be one by one: "If a revelation is made to another sitting by, let the first be silent." In other words, nobody was to take over the meeting, Paul says, for two reasons:

1. First, because the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. Someone might have said, "I can't help what I say. The Spirit of God is in me and he is speaking through me. Therefore, everything I say is of God." Paul says, "Rubbish! The spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. You can help yourself; you need not claim that you just have to say these things." As someone has said, there are always two kinds of speakers -- those who have something to say, and those who have to say something. The apostle is concerned that he limit the latter.
2. The second reason he gives is, the Spirit of God never creates confusion or disorder. Therefore, no

one is to dominate a meeting, to run away with it, or consider himself an inspired spokesman because God does not work that way. Let it be orderly and decently done and give room to others to speak and to share in the ministry. Remember, if there is strife, jealousy, confusion, argument, and that kind of thing, it is not a meeting led by the Spirit of God. God does not work that way. When that kind of a meeting is going on, it is some other spirit at work.

That brings Paul to the third major area of difficulty in the church, and that is the ministry of women. He says (and the verse is properly divided here) in Verse 33b:

As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. {1 Cor 14:33b-35 RSV}

It is this passage that has caused many people today to write off the Apostle Paul. They regard him as a bitter old bachelor who hated women and who was threatened by the exercise of any gifts by women. But, of course, that is a travesty on the character of the apostle. It ignores many other pictures of him and his relationship with women in the Scriptures:

- It is clear, from several accounts, that there were certain women who traveled with him in a small group of men and women to help him in many ways in his ministry.
- It is also clear from several accounts that the apostle speaks of these individual women with respect and love and warmth and praise for their work and for their ministry.
- To regard Paul as a woman-hating bachelor is indeed to miss the thrust of the Scriptures in this regard. In fact, in Chapter 11 of this same letter, he strongly defends the right of women to pray and prophesy in the church meeting. The only problem, he says, is: They must demonstrate in some way that they recognize God's moral order of leadership -- the principle of headship {which} Paul dealt with that at length in that chapter.

No, the problem here is not a woman ministering in the church at all. That was proper, despite the traditional interpretation of these events in the last two centuries. No, the problem was still, as the context makes clear, one of disorder and confusion. It probably grew out of the very freedom that women did have to minister in the church at Corinth. Both the Jewish community, and to a large degree the Greek community, put down the ministry of women. Certainly the Jews did; they did not allow it at all, but here in a Christian church women were permitted to minister under the recognition of the principle of headship. As a consequence, some of them undoubtedly went too far. This is a normal human tendency within all of us. They ran away with freedom. Some were doing this, as this account clearly suggests. They were asking questions and entering into debate on some of the issues that were being talked about and discussed in the meeting; thus they were turning it into a discussion group. Some, as Paul indicated earlier, had abandoned the head covering, which, in the city of Corinth, was a sign that they did indeed appreciate and recognize the leadership order that God had instituted. They were thus creating not only dissension, but, as he indicates here, a "shameful" situation. Non-Christians in the city were laughing at or disregarding the word of these Christians because of the violation in this regard.

That is what the apostle is concerned about. It is confirmed by his choice of words here. Notice he does not say it is forbidden for women to minister in the church. Nor does he say it is forbidden for women to prophesy, or to pray, or to teach. He does not apply that term to any of these things. Women are forbidden, he says, to speak -- "the women should keep silence ... they are not permitted to speak." There the word is *laleo*, which is the most common word for simply, conversation, talking, that is all. That was the problem. We could well interpret it, even, with the English word "chatter." This is what was going on. Women were entering in and talking it over, and they got carried away and sometimes turned the meeting into a kind of an open chatterbox, especially because they were exercising a freedom they rightly possessed.

It is well known that garrulousness is a quality more frequently, perhaps, found in women than in men. Men can be loose-tongued and run off at the mouth too, but women often have this problem.

There is the story of the woman who was rebuked for talking too much. She said, "Well, how can I know what I think if I haven't heard what I have to say?"

But the place, obviously, Paul says, for extensive, wordy discussion about these matters is the home -- "let her ask her husband at home." If you come to my house when we are involved in a theological discussion, you will see exactly what the apostle means. It goes on for hours, upstairs and downstairs. Then it is broken off for a while and we pick it up again at the table. And that is the right place for it. My wife has a keen, theological mind, which I greatly appreciate, and we have some very interesting discussions on these matters. Paul says that is where these lengthy discussions and debates ought to take place, not in the church meeting. That does not edify; it gets off the track; it digresses from the purpose and focus of the meeting. That is what he is warning against.

In Verses 36-38 he anticipates the reaction of many:

**What! Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?
{1 Cor 14:36 RSV}**

That is clearly satire. He is recognizing that there was a tendency among some in Corinth to think that they had unique revelation, special gifts that no one else had. Paul treats this in a rather sarcastic way with this kind of language, "Did the word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones who received it?" It almost sounds like what dear old Job said to his three comforters, "No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you," {Job 12:2 RSV}. People have a tendency sometimes to assume this.

I remember my dear patron saint, Dr. H. A. Ironside, telling me of an encounter he had with a woman who came up to him after a meeting. He had spoken on First Corinthians 6:11, where Paul says to the Corinthians, "such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus." This woman said, "Sir, you know you got those words mixed up; they are in the wrong order. You put sanctification before justification, but everyone knows that justification comes first, then you are sanctified." Dr. Ironside said to her, "Well, I was simply quoting the Apostle Paul." "Oh," she said, "That couldn't be. He would never have said that." "Well," he said, "Here is the passage." He turned to it and had her read it, and after reading it she said, "Well, Paul couldn't have been very clear on the doctrine of holiness if he wrote that!" So there are some people who assume that they have the original meaning and inspiration of Scripture, and they will even set aside the Scripture to sustain that.

Then Paul says:

If any one thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. {1 Cor 14:37 RSV}

In other words, the truly spiritual people always recognize the authority of the Scripture. This is very important in these days when people are claiming to be led of the Spirit, and when you point out from a passage of Scripture that what they are saying is contrary to it, they still insist on their feeling or their experience or their understanding as superior to that of the Word of God. Paul says that is not true. The Spirit of God never operates contrary to the written Word. Never!

Anyone who is truly Spirit-minded and Spirit-filled will recognize the authority of the Word of God.

The third thing he says to them is in Verse 38:

If any one does not recognize this, he is not recognized. {1 Cor 14:38 RSV}

Literally, "If any one be ignorant, let him be ignored." In other words, do not pay attention to him; do not needlessly exalt him or her or even get engaged in a lengthy debate about it. If they will not listen to the authority of the Word, then do not give them a platform from which to speak; just ignore them.

He closes with a statement gathering up his final words:

So, my brethren, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues; but all things should be done decently and in order. {1 Cor 14:39-40 RSV}

That has been the thrust of the whole passage. Choose prophesying, he says, it will build people up, it will comfort them, it will strengthen them, it will edify them. That is the supreme ministry when the church comes together. And do not forbid speaking in tongues, he says. He has, of course, the true biblical gift in view. No one knows whether there will not come in an unbeliever who perhaps needs the exercise of a gift like this. God is sovereign, and he has the right to exercise and to give gifts as he pleases, so do not forbid that. But, if it is the true, biblical gift, it will have the effect that the Scripture suggests of being a sign to unbelievers. If it is not the true biblical gift, however, if it is (as we have suggested in a previous message, a psychological phenomenon which is commonly mistaken for the biblical gift of tongues) then there is every right to forbid it in a church because it can be a very divisive and destructive thing. But, in all things, he says, let everything be done decently and in order. God is a God of order.

When the church comes together it can be built up in marvelous ways. It can be such a strengthening thing to meet together, to encourage one another in our faith, to share in the exercise of spiritual gifts, to be taught by the mind of God, by the Spirit of God, through the Word of God, and to be comforted in times of trial and testing and pressure. This is the purpose for the church getting together. But whatever you do, do not let it become an endlessly confusing ministry, misrepresentative of the character of God, who is a God of order and decency.

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