

## The Perfect Church Service 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

If you were given the opportunity **to design the perfect church service**, what would it look like?

Or if I can put it like this, how would you arrange our corporate worship if you were in charge?

Would we sing? And if yes, how many songs? And how many songs should we have in a row? 1? 3 at most? Or maybe a whole batch that last about 40 minutes?

**What about Bible readings?** I'm presuming you think it is a good idea to have the Bible read as God's people gather? But how many parts should we read? Just the one passage? Or what about two every week? One from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament? Or even three? Why not also have a reading from the Psalms as well?

**What about sermons?** What would be on your placard for sermon length? Would you be shouting for more? Or would you write something like this, "If after 10 minutes you haven't struck oil, stop boring!"

It's obvious that all of us have **our personal preferences** about the way things should. We all have our favourite way of doing things.

But here's my question for this morning, **what does God want us to do?** What does he **command** his people to do when they gather for corporate worship?

You may be surprised to hear but there is a lot of silence in the New Testament about what God wants us to do when we gather together to worship him.

Please don't misunderstand me. **It's not a free for all!** It's not that we are allowed to do whatever our personal preference might be. No God has set out some clear instructions for us in the Bible.

However, what he hasn't done is give us a detailed schedule of what we need to do for all of our time together. Instead, he has drawn the boundaries of what is acceptable, what is pleasing to him and what is essential to. And then he has left us tremendous freedom to construct our services in different ways.

We won't have time this morning to look at all the boundary markers God has laid out for us but I want to show us **one** that emerges from this section of **1 Corinthians chapter 14**.

Have a look at verse 29. **Read verses 29 to 33**.

- **For** God is **not a God of disorder** but of peace.

This big truth is repeated again in verse 40. **Read verse 40**.

- But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

**Have you ever been round a dinner table when everyone is speaking at the same time?** It's a horrible experience. It's loud, chaotic and not very loving. It normally ends with someone saying, "Can we please not all speak at the same time? Let's listen to each other."

If you want to get an idea of what the church in Corinth was like then think of a **loud, chaotic** and **selfish** dinner table.

This church did gather together but as they did the majority were focused on their own personal spiritual experience and paid little attention to their brothers and sisters in Christ. **The result was an uncontrolled shambles!**

In **1 Corinthians 14** Paul addresses two of the biggest reasons for their current chaos – how they used the gift of speaking in tongues and how they used the gift of prophecy.

In **verses 26 to 28** he focuses on speaking in tongues. In short, he says limit the number of people who do this, make sure they do it one at a time, and make sure everything is interpreted.

After addresses how to use the gift of tongues, Paul then moves on to the gift of prophecy in **verses 29 to 38**. As you'll see, he says lots of similar things. Only two or three prophets should speak and they should take their turns so they are not all talking at the same time.

I suspect many of you will be surprised and disturbed by what Paul writes in verses 34 and 35. **Read verses 34 and 35**.

These verses probably leave you asking one simple question, what? What on earth have I just heard? Can it be that the apostle Paul is commanding that women are not allowed to say anything in a public church service?

It should be obvious that this isn't what we believe here at Trinity Church. We love to have women read the Bible and lead us in prayer. In fact, even today it was Kylie who read this section of 1 Corinthians. When I put together the reading rota I deliberately made sure it was one of our female church members who would read this part of the Bible.

How can I be sure Paul is not banning the female voice in church services? Only a few chapters earlier, in **1 Corinthians chapter 11**, Paul has been actively encouraging women to pray and prophesy in corporate worship.

So he cannot be contradicting himself in chapter 14. **Paul is not stupid and he doesn't have a butterfly mind**.

He is both smart **and** under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so what he says in both chapters must hold together perfectly.

What does he mean when he says, "Women should remain silent in the churches"?

The key to understanding this verse is to know that the Greek word that is translated as women can also be translated as wives. It's the Greek word gynaikes. This can either mean women or wives and we only know what it is when we look closely at the other verses around it.

In this case I'm sure it must mean wives. The reason is because of what Paul says in 35. **Read verse 35**.

**Verses 34 and 35** should read., "Wives should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should **ask** their husbands at home, for it is disgraceful for a wife to speak in this manner in the church."

**You might not think this is any better!** However, here is the likely scenario Paul is addressing. Some of the husbands have spoken a word of prophecy and other prophets are weighing up the implications of what they have said. At this point some of their wives seem to have piped up, asking questions and undermining their husband's credibility.

This would have been both **chaotic** and **disrespectful**. And so Paul says, stop behaving like this. Respect your husbands and remember that God is a God of order.

**What does all this mean?** Look at how Paul concludes in verse 39. **Read verses 39 and 40**. "Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."

Let me finish by drawing out a **few** implications for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**First**, have you ever wondered why we love to bring order out of chaos? It might be as simple as tidying your room or weeding your garden or solving a complex problem at work, why is it that we feel good when order rules? Because this is what God is like. And God has made us to like himself.

God has **hardwired us in various ways** and life works best when we embrace the designer's instructions.

**Second**, the Holy Spirit wants our worship to be orderly.

I've noticed that Christians often swing to extreme positions on particular topics. One of them is **how the Holy Spirit operates in a church service**.

On the one hand there are some who are convinced that the only proper activity promoted by the Holy Spirit is the one which is **spontaneous**, **unplanned** and **unrehearsed**.

But then there are other Christians who are persuaded that the best work of the Holy Spirit, perhaps even the only work of the Holy Spirit is what he does before a church service during the week.

**Who is right?** Our temptation is to choose one position against the other. To swing this way or that way.

But the truth is that we don't need to choose. The Holy Spirit works in both ways in order to produce the same result – a service that is **both fitting** and **orderly**. Or let me put it like this...It may be that some in our church need to see that the Holy Spirit doesn't just work on Sundays. He is on duty 24/7. Maybe others of us need to realise that Sunday is not the Spirit's day off. In addition, to our pre-service planning, we should expect the Spirit to be prompting us on the day.

**Let me emphasise something.** The result will not be chaos and selfish. It will be orderly and loving.

It's worth noting that what looks orderly in one culture may look chaotic in another. So let's be careful that we don't make our culture's definition of orderly the standard that others need to follow. It is God's standard that counts above every earthly country.

**Third**, Christianity gives amazing scope for diversity and variety in corporate worship.

Sometimes Christians get worried that if we don't do everything the same the world will conclude that we're divided and disunited. Not at all!

**Difference can be beautiful.**

I love the **freedom** God gives us to express our culture in our corporate worship. My desire at Trinity is to help us reflect our international diversity in what we do together. **Let's pray.**