

An Orderly Worship

Sermon preached by Jonathan Huang for Houston Chinese Church
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❖ Introduction

- You know, every now and then, there are passages that you come across in the Bible that you read and just go, “How is *that* in the Bible? I mean, how in the *world* do you explain that?”
- Well, today’s passage is one of them. This is one of those places in the Bible where, if you’re new to Christianity or you’re just someone outside the faith looking in, you’re like, “Yeah, I’m not touching that with a ten-foot pole! Not going anywhere near *that* religion...because look at what it says about women.”
- I mean, just on a plain reading of the text, you’d be reasonably justified to say that the Bible is clearly backwards.
- This just goes to show how Christians treat women like dirt.
- And you can walk away concluding that the New Testament’s conception of men and women is just tilted way too much toward patriarchy and gender inequality.
- This just goes to show that Christianity can’t be trusted because the way it treats women reeks of male chauvinism.
- But the problem is, Christians are called to accept the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Which means we can’t just pick and choose what we want to believe.
- We can’t just pull out a pair of scissors, like Thomas Jefferson once did, and cut out parts of the Bible that we agree with and leave things out we don’t agree with so that we can have Bible passages mixed and matched to our own liking.¹
- No, this passage sticks out like a sore thumb because it goes against not just the cultural sensibilities of our day, but it can just feel embarrassing to even acknowledge that a passage like this *exists* in the Bible. The very Word of God we point to as our central authority as Christians.
- All this just goes to show why when you read any part of the Bible, *context matters*.

¹ Erin Blakemore, “Why Thomas Jefferson Rewrote the Bible Without Jesus’ Miracles and Resurrection,” History, last modified August 1, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/thomas-jefferson-bible-religious-beliefs>.

- Because if you don't interpret this passage on women in the church carefully and correctly, then you could end up with some seriously misguided views on what the Bible says about women and what they're supposed to do when a church gathers together for worship.
- And in context, this tricky passage on women lies in the middle of a broader series of teachings on spiritual gifts and the use of them in a corporate gathering of Christians, much like *this* one that we're in right now.
- And here, in context, we see the apostle Paul laying down some specific guidelines for how Christians ought to exercise their spiritual gifts when they gather to worship God—things to do, things not to do.
- What I want us to wrestle with in our time together is this: Why do we have to be so bound by rules and restrictions on our worship gatherings when those rules and restrictions can seem so stifling to spontaneity and even oppressive to women? In other words, why can't we just do whatever *we* think best when it comes to worship gatherings of the church?
- I want to point out three things that I see here in this text to help us think through this.
- So if you have your Bible, I want you to turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 14. And we'll start with verse 26.

❖ **Here's my first point: The way we gather for worship must reflect the God we worship (vv. 26-33a).**

- Last week, Pastor Jason went over the first part of chapter 14 and taught about the spiritual gifts, specifically the gifts of tongues and prophecy.
- He taught about the importance of intelligible worship as well as the power of evangelistic worship. And in verses 26 to the first part of verse 33, the apostle Paul moves on to point out the centrality of orderly worship.
- Look down at verse 26 with me: "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation." (ESV).
- Now just to clarify, when Paul talks about a "revelation" here, he's referring to the gift of prophecy where something spontaneously comes to mind from the Holy Spirit. And when that thought is expressed verbally in a known language to others, people in the church are built up and encouraged (1 Cor. 14:3).
- This doesn't seem to be an exhaustive list of what happens when the church gathers together. When someone has a hymn or a song, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.

- Paul isn't trying to say that these are the *only* things that can be done when we get together for worship.
- But he is trying to cast a vision for what the overall *environment* in a worship gathering should be like.
- Look down at the rest of verse 26: "Let all things be done for building up" (ESV).
- No matter what, God wants to make sure that anything and everything that takes place in a worship service for his *glory* ends up actually building up his *people*.
- Which makes you wonder what other priorities were taking place instead. Why did Paul feel such a need to emphasize the building up of believers not only here in this passage, but also in other parts of this letter as well?
- Listen to what he writes: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*" (1 Corinthians 12:7, ESV; emphasis mine).
- "...the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Corinthians 14:3, ESV).
- "So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in *building up the church*" (1 Corinthians 14:12, ESV; emphasis mine).
- I think what Paul was fighting against as he wrote to the Corinthians regarding the use of spiritual gifts in a worship gathering was the underlying tendency we *all* can have to take the gifts God's blessed us with to build up not the church, but our own reputations.
- To feed our own egos.
- And to steal glory for ourselves.
- You see, "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:28-29, ESV).
- But even us low and despised people of God, when endowed with supernatural gifts and abilities—because of the remaining sin in us—can turn the idea of receiving spiritual gifts into an opportunity to demonstrate to the world just how *gifted* we are.
- We turn the church into a gigantic talent show!
- Those who have a hymn to sing—who God's gifted with musical abilities to not only sing in pitch, but also to sing well...

- Those who not only have a lesson to bring—but have a way with their words that can *move* people and speak to people’s souls...
- Those with the ability to bring a revelation from the Spirit that can *convict* people deep down...
- Those with the Spirit-given ability to speak in a language they didn’t know of before or to interpret those languages on the spot...
- All these people would do well to express their gifts with *complete humility*. Because it’s not about them. It’s about building up and benefiting and blessing others.
- How?
- Look down at verse 27 with me: “If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged...”
- There’s a kind of humility that’s exercised and expressed when you’re called to take turns. In these early church gatherings, believers were to take turns if they spoke in tongues. It wasn’t a wild circus.
- There was a *limit* to the number of people who could speak in tongues.
- And if there wasn’t anyone present to interpret, then people were prohibited from speaking in tongues publicly in the worship gathering.
- They were to “keep silent in church and speak to” themselves “and to God” (14:28, ESV).
- There were *rules* for how prophets were to handle themselves in these gatherings. “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said” (1 Cor. 14:29, ESV).
- And they were to humble themselves enough to stop if someone else had a revelation while “sitting there” (1 Cor. 14:30, ESV).
- For, as verse 32 says, “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32, ESV). Which means, as one commentator puts it, “The urge to prophesy is subject...to the prophet. The impulse to speak may still be present, but the speaker can restrain those impulses and must yield the floor to another who receives a revelation.”²

² David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 661-662).

- These are clear rules, limitations, restrictions on what is and isn't supposed to take place whenever a church gathers for worship.
- But why? Why should the church subject itself to all these rules and restrictions, instead of give themselves to a freer expression of spontaneity? I mean, doesn't it just feel more right to allow freedom and spontaneity to guide our worship services, no matter where they take us?
- Not to say there isn't room for things unplanned or spontaneous at all. But Scripture is clear here that there ought to be order and an overall sense of coherence to the gathering of worshipping believers.
- Why? Because the way we gather for worship must reflect the very God we worship.
- Look down at verse 33 with me: "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (ESV).
- The "disorder in Corinth" was, as one commentator puts it, "not attributable to the workings of the Holy Spirit but to narcissistic exhibitionism, disdain for others with 'lesser' gifts, and disregard for the common good."³
- Another commentator on this passage tells us that what we need to see here is that the church in Corinth was operating more like pagan cults, "whose worship was characterized by frenzy and disorder."
- He says that "the character of one's deity is reflected in the character of one's worship. The Corinthians must therefore cease worship that reflects the pagan deities more than the God whom they have come to know through the Lord Jesus Christ."⁴
- Our God is a God of peace, of order. He's thoughtful in the way he sovereignly plans and ordains all that happens in this world through all of history.
- So making sure that our worship gatherings are intelligible and orderly helps to ensure that the spiritual gifts being exercised not only build up the church, but reflect the orderly nature of our God.
- If you've been worshipping with us at Houston Chinese Church for some time now, you can see this principle reflected in how our services are ordered from week to week.
- It's the same general format, with some changes now and then. There's a welcome. A call to worship. We'll sing some songs. Have a confession of sin. Followed by an assurance of pardon.

³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 664.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 697.

- There's an offertory with another worship song. A pastoral prayer. Scripture reading.
- Then there's the sermon, followed by another song or two.
- Once a month, we take communion together. Like we'll do later this morning.
- And then there's a benediction, followed by our congregation singing the doxology together.
- The order of service that we have provides just that: order. And what I want you to see is that there's biblical reason to shape our worship services in an orderly way like we experience week in and week out.
- So in some sense, I'm really preaching to the choir. Because even without preaching through this text, we're already carrying out the principles of an orderly worship gathering by the grace of God.
- But what I want you to take away from this portion is to know *why* we do what we do. Some of you might feel from time to time that our services are a little uptight. Or too structured. And I'm not saying that the way things are done here at HCC is the only way things ought to be done.
- There are definitely different ways for churches to live out this principle of orderly worship.
- But maybe the invitation here is that we pray that our gatherings would not only reflect the orderly nature of the God we worship, but that these gatherings would continue to be a place where the Spirit is at work, where people are built up, where the discouraged find comfort and encouragement, and where the spiritually weak are strengthened.
- I don't want to miss an opportunity to call us to pray together.
- So before I move on to the next point, I want to give us just a minute or two to pray for these things right now, right where you are. Feel free to pray with one or two people next to you if you'd like.
- Again, pray for our worship gatherings to reflect God's orderly nature. Pray that the Spirit would work among us, that people would be built up, that the discouraged would be encouraged, and that the spiritually weak would be strengthened. Let's pray.
- Amen. So, why should we feel bound by rules and restrictions and heed the principles of orderly worship when we gather together on Sunday mornings?
- First, the way we gather for worship must reflect the God we worship. And the God we worship is a God of peace and order, not confusion.

❖ **And second, the way we gather for worship must reflect God’s design for men and women (vv. 33b-35).**

- So now the hard part.
- What do we do with the next part in our passage? Look down at the second part of verse 33 with me: “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says. If there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church” (ESV).
- I know for some of you, this might be the first time you’ve come across this passage in the Bible. And you’re wondering, “What does *this* mean? How did *these* verses get in there?”
- They just seem so oppressive. So wrong. So unfair towards women.
- So how do we handle a text like this? Well, there are a number of ways that people have tried to explain the meaning of this passage. What I want to do is to give you a couple of interpretations that are out there. But ones I don’t find convincing. And then I’ll follow that up with an interpretation that *is* convincing.
- I’ll be drawing from what I’ve learned from three different Bible scholars, David Garland, D.A. Carson, and Wayne Grudem, as I go through this with y’all.
- So one way people have tried to explain away this passage is to just say that verses 34 and 35 are Paul’s rewording of what some Corinthians who were “male traditionalists” believed—people who simply wanted to silence the women in the church.
- So when you read that “women should keep silent in the churches” and that they’re not “permitted to speak,” proponents of this view would say these things weren’t really what Paul believed or called the church to do at all (1 Cor. 14:34, ESV).
- Now the problem with this interpretation is that nowhere else in this letter do we see that the Corinthian Christians actually believed something like this.
- So this view remains unconvincing.⁵
- Another common position is to argue that this passage was aimed at a very unique situation facing the church in Corinth. The women there were especially rowdy and unruly.
- So Paul wrote these words to provide that church, in Corinth specifically, an exhortation to get things in order.

⁵ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 666-667.

- This means that these words about women being “silent in the churches” or that they aren’t “permitted to speak” wouldn’t apply to any other church (1 Cor. 14:34, ESV).
- But this view fails to keep in mind that Paul was writing about something that was broadly applicable. Just look down at the second half of verse 33 with me.
- “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches” (1 Cor. 14:33b-34a). The fact that Paul is referring to “churches” in the plural here makes the interpretation that he was only trying to pinpoint a problem in the church of Corinth *very unlikely*.
- And besides, we find no place in this letter to the Corinthians that would make us think that Corinthian women, in particular, were “disruptive.” So *this* view remains unconvincing.⁶
- So is there another way to interpret this passage that would make more sense?
- I think there is. And like I mentioned earlier, context matters. Context matters here, because if you read this passage in isolation, you can arrive at some very misguided interpretations and misapplications.
- It’s important to recognize that this passage on women in the church finds itself right in the middle of a larger passage on how to properly exercise spiritual gifts, particularly when the church came together for worship.
- There’s nothing Scripturally that makes us think that women couldn’t speak in tongues or interpret tongues while in a gathered assembly.
- There’s also the situation back in chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians where wives were able to pray and prophesy within a worship gathering (1 Cor. 11:5).
- So these statements that we read here in chapter 14 about women keeping “silent” and not being “permitted to speak” clearly can’t mean that women are prohibited from speaking *at all* during worship gatherings (1 Cor. 14:34, ESV).
- And if we look at the immediate context, there’s actually a close connection between this passage on women and what Paul writes about directly before this in his guidelines on prophecy.
- Look back at verse 29 with me: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.”

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 242-245.

- The best way to interpret this tough passage on women is to understand that verses 30 through the first part of verse 33 give further guidance to the *expression* of prophecies, basically that those giving prophecies ought to give way to others whenever the Spirit gives a revelation to someone else in the gathering.
- But then the second part of verse 33 through verse 36 gives further guidance to the *evaluation* of prophecies. What Paul's trying to say here is that when it comes to *weighing* what others have said, "women should keep silent in the churches" (1 Cor. 14:34, ESV).⁷
- Paul isn't saying that women have to be completely silent whenever they show up in a worship gathering. He says something similar to those who spoke in tongues but had no one to interpret.
- He tells that group of people to "keep silent in church" (1 Cor. 14:28, ESV). This can't possibly mean these same tongue-speakers had to be completely silent the rest of the worship gathering or that they couldn't participate in other ways (like singing or praying) in a known language.⁸
- This interpretation of this passage could work even if you took the position that what was happening in the weighing of these prophecies was not simply judging whether prophecies were Scriptural or not, but whether we were dealing with a true or false prophet.
- The point is that Paul's restricting women in the church from the practice of evaluating what comes out of the prophets' mouths. This was something that men in the congregation were to do.
- Now I realize that this still begs the question: *why* are there even differences between what men and women can and can't do when the church gathers together for worship.
- Paul goes on to answer this in verse 34 when he says, "...the women should keep silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be in submission, as the Law also says" (1 Cor. 14:34, ESV).
- When Paul talks about "the Law" here, he's most likely referring to the creation order that we find in Genesis 2, where the Bible talks about how God first made man when he created the world. But when there wasn't a "helper fit for him" that could be found, God made the woman, Eve, from one of Adam's ribs and brought her to Adam (Gen. 2:20b-22, ESV).⁹

⁷ D. A. Carson, "'Silent in the Churches': On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 195.

⁸ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 233.

⁹ Carson, "Silent in the Churches," 195.

- D. A. Carson explains this further: “Paul understands this creation order that woman is to be subject to man—or at least that wife is to be subject to husband. In the context of the Corinthian weighing of prophecies, such submission could not be preserved if the wives participated: the first husband who uttered a prophecy would precipitate the problem.”¹⁰
- And in verse 35, when Paul says that “if there is anything [that women] desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home” (1 Cor. 14:35, ESV), he’s likely referring to a situation where wives are openly questioning prophecies that’ve been given during the worship gathering.
- And so these wives are called to speak up about those types of questions when they’re at home with their husbands.¹¹
- Many of you know that I serve as the Church Planting Resident here at our church. We’ve been in a season of recruiting all the way since last September. And just later this afternoon, we’ll be moving into our next stage of team development. So it’s exciting.
- But one of the bigger issues that came up multiple times as I was recruiting people for our team outside our church was the role of women in the church.
- I remember meeting one woman in particular who wanted to preach. She went to seminary and she loved teaching and preaching.
- And, you know, we’re a church plant that’s going to the view men and women as equal in value and dignity and worth.
- But at the same time, we believe there’s a God-given design for the way men and women function in the church.
- Having different roles doesn’t make one better or worse than the other.
- And as it says in 1 Timothy 2, women aren’t “to teach or to exercise authority over a man” (2:12, ESV).
- And I interpret that as taking place in an assembly of both men and women gathering for corporate worship, much like the situation we’re talking about in 1 Corinthians 14.
- And so I had to be up front with her about how we wouldn’t have women preaching during our Sunday services.
- Eventually, she got back to me and decided not to join us because of her desire to preach.

¹⁰ Carson, “Silent in the Churches.”

¹¹ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 671.

- The role of women in churches is a controversial issue. It's an issue that churches will have to make some very practical decisions based on how they view Scripture.
- I think this is an area that fellow believers can legitimately disagree with each other about. But each church will have to decide where it stands.
- As you think about these things, let me challenge you to continue to make Scripture your final authority, not the culture around us or what simply makes sense to you.
- If this is a topic that you have more questions about, I want you to write down the name of this book and take a look through it. *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*. Written by Wayne Grudem.
- Let me also invite you to talk with any of the pastors at our church or with myself if you want to explore more about this issue.
- So why do we have to be so bound by rules and restrictions on our worship gatherings when those rules and restrictions can seem so stifling to spontaneity and even oppressive to women?
- First, the way we gather for worship must reflect the God we worship.
- Second, the way we gather for worship must reflect God's design for men and women.
- ❖ **And third, the way we gather for worship must reflect our submission to God (vv. 36-40).**
 - Look down at verse 36 with me. "Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?" (1 Cor. 14:36, ESV).
 - These are rhetorical questions. And it seems as though Paul's challenging any inclination in the Corinthians to resist the commands and exhortations that he's given them.
 - He challenges them by somewhat sarcastically asking if God's Word originated from them. Or if the Word of God reached them apart from anyone else in the world.
 - Clearly, the answer to these two questions is "no."
 - The point here is that God's Word is for all the people of God, applicable for every assembly of gathered saints. The Corinthians don't exist in an isolated bubble.
 - And because of that, they should be willing to submit to, comply with, live according to the guidelines given above for the sake of honoring God through an orderly worship.

- Take a look at verse 37: “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophecy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:37-40, ESV).
- What Paul’s saying is not optional. They aren’t just friendly suggestions for what could make corporate worship gatherings better. To neglect these commands would be a serious problem in the eyes of God!
- The reason we do things the way we do in our worship gatherings should ultimately be because we desire, to the best of our ability, to worship God the way *he* wants us to.
- Not because we think it’ll attract more people to our church.
- Not because we think it’ll make more sense in light of surrounding cultural values.
- And definitely not because it suits our own tastes and preferences.
- Brothers and sisters, the way we gather for worship must reflect our submission to God. And the way we submit to God in our worship is to make sure what we do together is aligned with Scripture.
- As Paul wraps up his teachings on the spiritual gifts, he gives us a vision for how our worship gatherings should be. And in the end, we find that the way we gather for worship must ultimately reflect the God we worship. And that’s a God of peace and order, and not confusion.
- We find that the way we gather for worship must reflect God’s design for men and women. And not just what we think is best or what the culture thinks is best.
- And we find that the way we gather for worship must reflect our submission to God because ultimately, he has the right to govern how we worship him.
- May all things here in our worship gatherings at HCC be done so that each of us is built up and encouraged. And may all things be done in a way that leads to order, and not confusion, so that our worship would truly reflect the God we worship.