

Decent and Orderly Corporate Worship

by
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“Our church’s worship is pretty formal, but I prefer Holy Spirit-led worship.” Such was the comment I overheard recently by a young evangelical describing his church’s worship service, illustrating a very common perception by many evangelicals today—if the Holy Spirit actively works in worship, the results will be something extraordinary, an experience “quenched” by too much form and order. A common perception, to be sure, but how grounded in Scripture is this expectation concerning the nature and purpose of corporate worship?

My goal in this presentation is to assess this common expectation, measuring it against what is perhaps the single most important text in the New Testament regarding the nature and purpose of corporate worship.

The Default Expectation of the Holy Spirit’s Work in Worship

Arguably, the default expectation of contemporary evangelical worshippers is that the Holy Spirit works in worship in such a way so as to create an extraordinary experience, well expressed in the popular worship song by Bryan and Katie Torwalt:

Holy spirit, You are welcome here
Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere
Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for
To be overcome by Your presence, Lord²

Many theologians and authors who have helped to shape contemporary evangelical worship embody a theology of the Holy Spirit’s primary work as that of making God’s presence known. For example, Wayne Grudem argues, “The work of the Holy Spirit is to manifest the active presence of God in the world, and especially the church. . . . It seems that one of his primary purposes in the new covenant age,” Grudem continues, “is to manifest the presence of God, to give indications that make the presence of God known. . . . To be in the Holy Spirit is really to be in an atmosphere of God’s manifested presence.”³ Zac Hicks agrees: “The Holy Spirit has an

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²Bryan Torwalt and Katie Torwalt, “Holy Spirit,” 2011, accessed October 31, 2018, <https://songselect.ccli.com/Songs/6087919/holy-spirit>. This is a CCLI Top 10 song.

³Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 634, 641, 648.

agenda in manifesting his presence to us.”⁴ Bob Kauflin believes that “there are times, of course, when we become unexpectedly aware of the Lord’s presence in an intense way. A sudden wave of peace comes over us. An irrepressible joy rises up from the depths of our soul.”⁵ “None of us,” Kauflin insists, “should be satisfied with our present experience of the Spirit’s presence and power.”⁶

This expectation is certainly not new; theologians such as John Owen and Jonathan Edwards addressed the religious “enthusiasts” of their day.⁷ However, the contemporary iteration is rooted in a Pentecostal theology of the Holy Spirit’s work. In their insightful *Concise History of Contemporary Worship, Lovin’ on Jesus*, Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth convincingly demonstrate that Pentecostalism, with its “revisioning of a New Testament emphasis upon the active presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit,” is one of five key sources of contemporary worship.⁸ They suggest that “Pentecostalism’s shaping of contemporary worship has been both through its own internal development and through an influencing of other Protestants in worship piety and practice,” including the following ways its theology has shaped contemporary worship:

1. mainstreaming the desire to be physical and expressive in worship
2. highlighting intensity as a liturgical virtue
3. a certain expectation of experience to the forms of contemporary worship, and
4. a musical sacramentality [that] raises the importance of the worship set as well as the musicians leading this set.⁹

Daniel Albrecht agrees: “The presence of the Holy Spirit then is fundamental to a Pentecostal perspective of worship. The conviction that the Spirit is present in worship is one of the deepest beliefs in a Pentecostal liturgical vision. The expectancy of the Spirit’s presence is often palpable in the liturgy. . . . Their liturgical rites and sensibilities encourage becoming consciously present to God—even as God’s presence is expected to become very real in worship.”¹⁰

This experience of the Holy Spirit’s active presence is often directly tied to music, specifically to the “flow” of the emotional expressiveness of the worship music. Hicks suggests, “Part of leading a worship service’s flow . . . involves keeping the awareness of God’s real, abiding

⁴ Zac M. Hicks, *The Worship Pastor: A Call to Ministry for Worship Leaders and Teams* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 33.

⁵ Bob Kauflin, *True Worshipers: Seeking What Matters to God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2015), 133.

⁶ Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 84–85.

⁷ See Ryan J. Martin, “‘Violent Motions of Carnal Affections’: Jonathan Edwards, John Owen, and Distinguishing the Work of the Spirit from Enthusiasm,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 15 (2010): 99–116.

⁸ Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 17–18. The other four are youth ministry, baby boomers, Jesus People, and church growth missiology.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰ Daniel E. Albrecht, “Worshiping and the Spirit: Transmuting Liturgy Pentecostally,” in *The Spirit in Worship—Worship in the Spirit*, ed. Teresa Berger and Bryan D. Spinks (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 239.

presence before his worshipers. As all of the elements of worship pass by, the one constant—the True Flow—is the presence of the Holy Spirit himself.” This kind of flow, according to Hicks, “lies in understanding and guiding your worship service’s emotional journey.”¹¹ “Grouping songs in such a way that they flow together,” worship leader Carl Tuttle explains, “is essential to a good worship experience.”¹² The goal and expectation of any worship service, according to Barry Griffing, “is to bring the congregational worshipers into a corporate awareness of God’s manifest presence.”¹³ James Steven notes, “By investing heavily in particular signs of the Spirit’s presence, such as ecstatic physical patterns of behavior, church members define the Spirit by the empirical measurement of particular phenomena, which if absent imply that the Spirit has not ‘turned up.’”¹⁴ For Pentecostals and other continuationists, this expectation includes miraculous gifts such as tongues and prophecy, but even for other evangelicals who do not hold to a continuationist position on miraculous gifts, the default expectation is that the Holy Spirit will manifest God’s presence in other extraordinary ways such as a heightened experience of emotional euphoria.

Thus, worship in which the Holy Spirit is directly active is often necessarily connected with spontaneity and “freedom” of form. Worship that is structured and regulated is the opposite of “Spirit-led” worship in this view. As Lim and Ruth note, most contemporary worship, impacted as it is by this understanding of the Holy Spirit’s work in worship, considers “extemporaneity as a mark of worship that is true and of the Holy Spirit, that is, worship in Spirit and truth (John 4:24). This view of extemporaneity” they note, “has been held widely within Free Church ways of worship.”¹⁵ What Albrecht observes of Pentecostal worship has become the standard expectation for most of evangelicalism:

In the midst of radical receptivity, an encounter with the Holy Spirit may occur. Pentecostals envision such encounters as integral to the worship experience. While an overwhelming or overpowering experience of/in the Spirit is neither rare nor routine for a particular Pentecostal worshiper, the experiential dimension of worship is fundamental. The liturgical vision sees God as present in the service; consequently, Pentecostals reason that a direct experience of God is a normal expectation.¹⁶

¹¹ Hicks, *The Worship Pastor*, 184.

¹² Carl Tuttle, “Song Selection & New Song Introduction,” in *Worship Leaders Training Manual* (Anaheim, CA: Worship Resource Center/Vineyard Ministries International, 1987), 141.

¹³ Barry Griffing, “Releasing Charismatic Worship,” in *Restoring Praise & Worship to the Church* (Shippensburg, PA: Revival Press, 1989), 92.

¹⁴ James Steven, “The Spirit in Contemporary Charismatic Worship,” in *The Spirit in Worship—Worship in the Spirit*, ed. Teresa Berger and Bryan D. Spinks (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 258.

¹⁵ Lim and Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus*, 38.

¹⁶ Albrecht, “Worshipping and the Spirit: Transmuting Liturgy Pentecostally,” 240.

Characterizing the Holy Spirit's Work

Ultimately, current expectations concerning the Holy Spirit's work in worship must derive, not from experience, but from Scripture. In order to lay such a biblical foundation, I will next survey how the Bible broadly characterizes the Holy Spirit's activity, and then narrow the focus to the church age and specifically corporate worship.

Is the Holy Spirit's Work Characteristically Extraordinary Experience?

Taking all of the biblical data concerning the Holy Spirit's work throughout history into account, there is no doubt that he sometimes works in extraordinary ways. Yet extraordinary works of the Spirit are not the ordinary way God works his sovereign will through the course of biblical history. When extraordinary experiences occur, they happen during significant transitional stages in the outworking of God's plan. Sinclair Ferguson helpfully explains:

In the Scriptures themselves, extraordinary gifts appear to be limited to a few brief periods in biblical history, in which they serve as confirmatory signs of new revelation and its ambassadors, and as a means of establishing and defending the kingdom of God in epochally significant ways. . . . Outbreaks of the miraculous sign gifts in the Old Testament were, generally speaking, limited to those periods of redemptive history in which a new stage of covenantal revelation was reached. . . . But these sign-deeds were never normative. Nor does the Old Testament suggest they should have continued unabated even throughout the redemptive-historical epoch they inaugurated. . . . Consistent with this pattern, the work of Christ and the apostles was confirmed by "signs and wonders."¹⁷

In other words, to focus on the relatively few cases in biblical history of extraordinary works of the Holy Spirit and draw from those a theology that assumes this to be his regular activity fails to take into account the purpose of these works in the overarching plan of God. Furthermore, even the extraordinary works of the Spirit in Scripture, such as giving revelation or empowering for service, hardly resemble the kinds of extraordinary manifestations contemporary worshipers have come to associate with the Holy Spirit, such as emotional euphoria or "atmosphere." Even if Christians in the present age should expect extraordinary works of the Spirit to regularly occur, what most contemporary evangelicals have come to expect does not fit the biblical pattern for how the Holy Spirit works.

Ordering as a Characteristic of the Holy Spirit's Work

Rather, the ordinary work of the Holy Spirit throughout Scripture is better characterized, not as *extraordinary experience* but rather as an *ordering* of the plan and people of God.

¹⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 224–225.

Ferguson notes that the very first action of the Holy Spirit in Scripture is “that of extending God’s presence into creation in such a way as *to order and complete what has been planned in the mind of God.*”¹⁸ Jonathan Edwards developed this theme in his discussion of the Holy Spirit’s work in creation:

It was more especially the Holy Spirit’s work to bring the world to its beauty and perfection out of the chaos, for the beauty of the world is a communication of God’s beauty. The Holy Spirit is the harmony and excellency and beauty of the Deity . . . therefore it was his work to communicate beauty and harmony to the world, and so we read that it was he that moved upon the face of the waters.¹⁹

“This,” Ferguson continues, “is exactly the role the Spirit characteristically fulfills elsewhere in Scripture.”²⁰ Indeed, this overarching characteristic of *ordering* describes much, if not all, of what the Holy Spirit does throughout Scripture, including giving revelation, creating life (both physical and spiritual), and sanctifying individual believers: “the Spirit orders (or re-orders) and ultimately beautifies God’s creation.”²¹ Graham Cole summarizes, “Creation and its sustenance are the work of the Spirit as the Spirit implements the divine purposes in nature and history.”²²

Purpose of Revelation

Spirit-given revelation also had the ultimate purpose of bringing order to God’s plan in the world. The Holy Spirit gives special revelation to disclose the nature and character of God, explain God’s requirements, correct sin, and give hope for the future. Likewise, he guides the apostles into the truth (John 16:13) necessary to establish Christian doctrine and set the church in order (1 Tim 3:15). Ultimately, he inspires a “prophetic word more fully confirmed” (2 Peter 1:19–21), the canonical Scriptures, given to believers “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). The nature of such inspiration is important as well: the Holy Spirit did not inspire the Scriptures by bringing authors into a sort of mystical trance as they were “carried along” (2 Peter 1:21); rather, as helpfully defined by John Frame, inspiration is “a divine act that creates an identity between a divine word and a human word”²³—each author conscientiously penned the Scriptures (Acts 1:16, 4:25, Heb 3:7, 1 Cor 2:12–13) using craftsmanship (e.g. the Psalms), research (e.g. Luke 1:1–4), and available cultural forms and idioms. Spirit-inspired revelation is both for the purpose of order and produced in an orderly fashion.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21. Emphasis original.

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies,” no. 293, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, 13, The “Miscellanies,”* (Entry Nos. a–500), ed. Thomas A. Schafer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 384.

²⁰ Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 21.

²¹ Ibid., 22.

²² Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 282.

²³ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, vol. 4 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 140.

Purpose of Empowering

Likewise, the empowering of individual leaders for special service was for the ultimate purpose of bringing to order God’s redemptive plan in both Israel and the church. This is true of Moses and the elders of Israel. As Ferguson notes, “Just as the Spirit produced order and purpose out of the formless and empty primeval created ‘stuff’ (Gen 1:2), so, when the nation was newborn but remained in danger of social chaos, the Spirit of God worked creatively to produce right government, order, and direction among the refugees from Egypt.”²⁴ Likewise, the Spirit gifted Bezalel and Oholiab with skills necessary for building the tabernacle. Ferguson observes, “The beauty and symmetry of the work accomplished by these men in the construction of the tabernacle not only gave aesthetic pleasure, but a physical pattern in the heart of the camp which served to re-establish concrete expressions of the order and glory of the Creator and his intentions for his creation.”²⁵ Indeed, in his fascinating book, *Spirit and Beauty*, Patrick Sherry demonstrates that “a long list of Christian theologians, from Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria in the early Church to more recent writers like Edwards and Evdokimov, have associated the Holy Spirit with beauty.”²⁶ The Holy Spirit’s work of beautifying could be considered a subset of the broader category of ordering. This is true as well for his empowering of apostles in the early church, gifting them with the necessary abilities to both quickly spread the gospel message beyond Jerusalem “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8) and firmly establish the doctrine and practice of the early church (2 Cor 12:12, Heb 2:4). In other words, while it is accurate to say that the Holy Spirit has worked in extraordinary ways, these were rare, and their function was to bring God’s purposes into order.

Salvation and Sanctification

The Holy Spirit’s characteristic work is not only an ordering of God’s historical-redemptive plan, but it also a “moral ordering.”²⁷ This work begins with his acts of convicting sinners (John 16:8) and regenerating hearts (Titus 3:5), bring life and order to once dead and disordered lives. This re-ordering continues with his frequently mentioned work of sanctification (Rom 15:16, 1 Cor 6:11, 2 Thess 2:13, 1 Pet 1:2). He “circumcises the hearts” of believers (Rom 2:29) and strengthens their inner being (Eph 3:16), pouring love into their hearts (Rom 5:5) and leading them to fulfill “the righteous requirement of the law” (Rom 8:4). Of particular importance for this discussion is a careful focus on what Paul calls “the fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22–23, the results of such an ordering in the life of the Christian: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Indeed, the overwhelming emphasis in the NT concerning what will characteristically define the life of a mature, Spirit-filled Christian is on sobriety, discipline, dignity, and self-control—Paul commands believers to “think with sober judgment” (Rom 12:3), “be sober” (1 Thess 5:6, 8), and “be self-controlled”

²⁴ Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 22.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics*, Second edition. (Scm Press, 2002), 77.

²⁷ Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, 24.

(Tit 2:12), as does Peter (1 Pet 1:13, 4:7, 5:8; 2 Pet 1:6). In particular, he urges older men to “be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness,” older woman to “be reverent in behavior,” and younger women and men to “be self-controlled” (Tit 2:2–6). None of these evidences of the work of the Holy Spirit in a believer’s life resemble what a contemporary worshiper would describe as “extraordinary experience.” Rather, these are the result of the progressive work of the Spirit to sanctify a believer through the disciplines of his Word. John Murray summarizes the Holy Spirit’s work in sanctification: “It is the efficacious and transforming enlightenment of the Holy Spirit by which the people of God attain ‘unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ (Ephesians 4:13).”²⁸

Purpose of the Gifts

This concept of *ordering* also describes the purpose of the Spirit’s work of gifting, specifically, an ordering of the body of Christ. Paul states that “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). He explicitly connects the Spirit’s giving of gifts to bringing order within the church, commanding, “Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church” (1 Cor 14:12). The Holy Spirit’s gifting of individual Christians with a diversity of ministry abilities serves to build up the unity of the Church—many members of one body (1 Cor 12:12, Rom 12:5), with the goal that this body will “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). It is in this context that Paul most clearly defines Spirit baptism—“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13)—which, even if the Holy Spirit is the agent, involves an ordering such that the body of Christ is formed and unified. Or, to use another NT metaphor for the Church, by the Spirit, believers “are being built together into a dwelling place for God,” “a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21–22).

Ordering in Corporate Worship

This metaphor of the Spirit building believers into a temple for God narrows the focus of the Holy Spirit’s work specifically to corporate worship. The temple metaphor is not coincidental; the gathered NT church is the dwelling place for the Spirit of God in this age in the same way that the temple was God’s dwelling place in the OT economy.²⁹ In this temple, built by the Spirit of God and indwelt by him, worship takes place. In fact, it is the Holy Spirit of God who makes worship possible. Christians come to enjoy communion with God through the person and work of Jesus Christ, but this happens “in one Spirit” (Eph 2:18).

This also may be what Christ meant in John 4 when he said that God is seeking those who will “worship the Father in spirit and truth” (v. 23). Since “God is a spirit” (v. 24) and does not have a body like man, true worship takes place in its essence in the non-corporeal

²⁸ John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957), 225.

²⁹ Metaphorical reference to the temple in 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 2 Corinthians 6:16 employ plural pronouns, while Paul also describes the bodies of individual believers as “a temple of the Holy Spirit within you” (1 Cor 6:19).

realm of the Spirit, which is why it is essential that the Holy Spirit dwell within the NT temple—the Church—in the same way he dwelt in the temple of the Old Testament. And while in the Old Testament, worship was specifically localized to that physical, Spirit-indwelt temple, “the hour is now here” (v. 23) that worship takes place wherever two or three Spirit-indwelt believers gather together, for there he is “in the midst of them” (Matt 18:20).

1 Corinthians 14

Furthermore, characterizing the Holy Spirit’s work as one of *ordering* comes even more into clarity when narrowing the focus of his work to corporate worship. The key passage for this focus is 1 Corinthians 14.

¹ Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. ² For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. ³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵ Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

Corporate Worship Context

Notice first that the context of the discussion in this chapter is “in church” (v. 19), “when you come together” (v. 26); that is, the context is specifically corporate gatherings of the church. There is a significant focus here upon gifts given to believers “through the Spirit” (12:8) or “by the one Spirit” (12:9), what chapter 14 calls “manifestations of the Spirit” (v. 12). But the specific focus is on the use of such gifts in the context of “coming together” within the gatherings of the church. Thus what the chapter teaches about use of spiritual gifts within church gatherings provides broader principles for the nature of corporate worship.

Tongues vs. Prophecy

Before discerning those principles, however, it is important to grasp something of the nature of these gifts Paul addresses. Here in chapter 14, Paul directs his attention to two primary spiritual gifts, prophecy and tongues. As Richard Gaffin notes, “A deliberate contrast between prophecy and tongues structures the whole chapter. This pairing runs like a backbone down the body of almost the entire argument.”³⁰ In the first half of the chapter, Paul’s argument is essen-

³⁰ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979), 56.

tially that the believers in the Corinthian church should desire the gift of prophecy *over* the gift of tongues. Notice what he says in verse 5: “Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.” And again in verse 18: “Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.” Why is that? Determining why Paul believes the gift of prophecy is better than tongues reveals key principles about the nature of the corporate gatherings he’s addressing.

Prophecy

But in order to do that, we need to grasp what, exactly, these gifts were. Perhaps one of the most concise definitions of prophecy in Scripture comes in Deuteronomy 18 with the promise of a coming Messianic prophet who would follow in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets of old:

¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

To prophesy is to speak the very words of God. Sometimes those words are predictive; more often those words are instructive or exhortative. But no matter the content, prophecy is the delivery of direct, divine revelation to the degree that one who prophesies can always unequivocally say, “Thus says the Lord.” Please note that I am distinguishing the gift of prophecy from preaching; preaching is certainly the proclamation of God’s revelation, but preaching does not necessarily involve direct revelation from God, and preaching includes the preacher’s own application and exhortation from God’s revelation. I am also rejecting any claim that NT prophecy takes a different form than the standard of OT prophecy. I do not have time to defend this definition of prophecy here, but I would direct your attention to Sinclair Ferguson’s discussion in his book on the Holy Spirit or Bruce Compton’s excellent analysis in the *Detroit Seminary Journal* of Wayne Grudem’s position.³¹ The classic definition of prophecy is that it is direct revelation from the Lord.

Tongues

Although perhaps more controversial, what is convenient about discerning the nature of tongues is that there are only four texts in all of Scripture in which the gift appears. First Corinthians 12–14 is one of them, and the other three are found in the book of Acts. Three observations from the appearances of tongues in Acts reveal the nature and purpose of the gift and set up an important context for Paul’s discussion in 1 Corinthians. First, “tongues” (*glossais*) and “languages” (*dialecto*) are used interchangeably in Acts 2. Tongues speaking is the ability to

³¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997); Bruce Compton, “The Continuation of New Testament Prophecy and a Closed Canon: Revisiting Wayne Grudem’s Two Levels of NT Prophecy,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 22 (2017): 57–73.

speak in a known language that the speaker has never learned. Second, the three appearances of tongues in Acts involve the conversion of first Jews from around the world, then Gentiles within the land of Israel (Cornelius and his household in chapter 10), then Gentiles outside Israel (Gentiles in Ephesus in chapter 19). In each case, the purpose appears to be as a sign, particularly to unbelieving Israel, that membership in the body of Christ is without national distinction. Third, in two of the three cases we find that the content of the speech was “the mighty works of God” (2:11) and “extolling God” (10:46). In other words, the purpose was not evangelism, but rather praising God in known languages as a sign to unbelieving Israel that that they are no longer the exclusive focus of God’s attention and love—now there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him. It was a sign to them that God was shifting his focus away from them for a time and toward the Gentile nations. In fact, Paul specifically makes this point in 1 Corinthians 14, when he quotes Isaiah 28:11–12 in verse 21: “In the Law it is written, ‘By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.’” The appearance of these “strange tongues” during these early years of the church was a pronouncement of curse upon the nation of Israel. The gift of tongues, as is evident in the three appearances in Acts along with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14, had a very specific purpose: it served as a sign to unbelieving Israel that membership in the church was without national distinction.

This understanding of the nature of prophecy and tongues helps us to understand why Paul would tell the Corinthian believers to prefer prophecy over tongues. Remember, Paul is specifically focusing on corporate worship, and therefore his insistence that tongues is less desirable than prophecy reveals to us some important principles about corporate worship.

Qualifications

Now, before we focus on the principles about corporate worship that we can derive from Paul’s discussion of tongues and prophecy in 1 Corinthians 14, I need to offer a couple of qualifications. First, there is, of course, debate over whether these gifts of tongues and prophecy continue today or whether they have ceased. Although I will not be able to offer a complete defense in this presentation, I believe that these spiritual gifts have ceased since (a) the sign of tongues, as we have seen, served a very limited function that is no longer necessary, and (b) since we now have a “prophetic word more fully confirmed” (2 Peter 1:19) in the complete canon of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, God no longer delivers new revelation through human prophets. However, the principles concerning the purpose and nature of corporate worship found here in 1 Corinthians 14 would still apply even if these gifts still remained; and actually, the principles perhaps even carry more weight considering the fact that Paul gave them when these gifts were still in operation. In other words, reasoning from the greater to the lesser, if the principles in this passage applied when these gifts were still in operation, how much more should they apply once the gifts have ceased?

That leads to a second qualification, however. I believe an argument could be made that the tongues practiced by the believers in Corinth was actually not from the Spirit of God. For

example, some interpreters suggest that the singular “a tongue” in this passage should be understood in contrast to plural “tongues” in Acts, and thus refers to a counterfeit pagan ecstatic speech common in the Greek mystery religions of the day. Again, however, whether the tongues practiced in Corinth were legitimate or not, the principles about corporate worship in this passage apply today.

The Nature and Purpose of Corporate Worship

So, Paul’s central argument in at least the first half of 1 Corinthians 14 is that for corporate worship, the gift of prophecy—divine revelation from God—is more desirable than the gift of tongues—a sign meant for unbelievers in the form of speaking praise to God in a known language but one not known by anyone in the congregation. This very central argument implies some key principles about the nature and purpose of corporate worship gatherings.

Corporate, Not Individual

First, corporate worship is *corporate* worship, not *individual* worship. This is the essential difference between tongues and prophecy: tongues is individual expression toward God, while prophecy has corporate benefit.

Notice how Paul describes the purpose of tongues in verse 2: “For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but utters the mysteries in the Spirit.” We saw this in the book of Acts—the content of tongues was praise toward God, and while in the case of Pentecost there were people from various nations present who could understand their specific dialects, if someone spoke in another dialect within a corporate worship service in the church at Corinth, no one in the congregation would have been able to understand what was being said. Instead, tongues in that context is only individual expression toward God. I take “spirit” in verse 2 to refer to the human spirit rather than the Holy Spirit.³² In other words, a person speaking in tongues is expressing to the Lord mysteries of his spirit since no one else can understand what he is saying. And again in verse 4: “The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself.” The whole rest of the section highlights the personal and individual nature of the gift of tongues. If someone speaks in a language that no one else in the congregation knows, he might bring individual praise to God, and he might have a legitimate individual experience with God that builds up himself, but he is of no benefit to the congregation as a whole.

Prophecy, on the other hand, is a gift that edifies the entire congregation. Paul states this clearly in verse 3: “On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” And again in verse 4: “but the one who prophesies builds up the church.” When the revelation of God is clearly proclaimed to God’s people in words they can understand, that builds up the church, which emphasizes the im-

³² See W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 10: Romans Through Galatians*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 272.

portance of recognizing the corporate nature of public worship. This is not to say that individual expression is always inappropriate—as Paul says in verse 5, if there is an interpreter, then tongues speaking can be edifying to all. In other words, if there is individual expression in corporate worship, it must be such that has corporate benefit.

Paul’s emphasis here runs contrary to a common way of thinking that has become prevalent in evangelicalism today, even among those who have in a sense recovered a theocentric focus to corporate worship, in which the purpose of the worship service is assumed to be for individuals to have a personal experience with God. Individual praise to God and self-edification are good, but when we gather as the church, our focus should be corporate, not individual.

Believers, Not Unbelievers

Second, corporate worship is for believers, not unbelievers. Notice in verse 22 where Paul says that tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers. As we saw in Acts, God gave the sign of tongues in order to help first Jewish unbelievers, then Gentiles within Israel, and then Gentiles outside Israel recognize that anyone who believed in the name of the Lord would be saved. But the purpose of the corporate gatherings of the church is not primarily to bring unbelievers to faith in Christ; corporate worship is first and foremost a gathering of Christians, which is another reason Paul emphasized the superiority of prophecy—a gift of benefit for believers—over tongues in corporate worship.

This is not at all to downplay the importance of evangelism for the church. Indeed, part of what it means to fulfill the Great Commission is to preach the gospel to every living creature. But evangelism should happen primarily as we go out into the world; when we gather as the church, we are gathering as believers.

Edification, Not Expression

Third, Paul’s discussion of tongues and prophecy in this text helps us to understand that the purpose of corporate worship gatherings is edification, not merely expression. As we saw in Acts, the content of speaking in tongues was the exultation and praise of God. That’s clear in this chapter as well: Paul says in verse 2, “one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God,” and he describes the content of tongues speaking in verses 16–17 as giving thanks to God. So speaking in tongues was certainly an act of individual expression toward God that brought him glory, and yet Paul indicates that in corporate worship, not only should we be concerned about the corporate rather than just the individual, but we also should be primarily concerned about corporate edification rather than simply corporate expression. Just survey briefly with me through the chapter and notice how much emphasis there is here upon the edification of the whole congregation in corporate worship:

v. 3: “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation”

- v. 4: “builds up the church”
- v. 5: “that the church may be built up”
- v. 6: “how will I benefit you”
- v. 9: “how will anyone know what is said”
- v. 12: “strive to excel in building up the church”
- v. 17: “the other person is not being built up”
- v. 19: “to instruct others”

And this point really all climaxes in verse 26 “Let all things be done for building up.” In other words, one of the core reasons Paul insists that the gift of prophecy is to be desired over tongues in corporate worship is that tongues is primarily a gift of individual expression toward God, while prophecy is a gift that better fits the formative purpose of corporate worship. This is a passage about corporate worship services, and yet the emphasis is not upon expression of worship but rather on edification.

Now this is a point that may seem to be a bit counter-intuitive. This is worship after all, isn't it? Isn't worship supposed to be for God? Isn't the whole problem with much evangelical worship today that it is focused on people instead of God? Isn't it correct to say that in corporate worship there is an audience of One and that our purpose here is to express worship toward him?

Well, while I do believe that the recovery of a God-centered focus in corporate worship is a welcome and necessary corrective to the man-centered, entertainment focus of much of contemporary worship, it is actually incorrect to say that corporate worship is just about expressing praise and thanks to God. Yes, God is the focus of corporate worship, God is the center of corporate worship, and the adoration of God is the goal of corporate worship, but as is clear from what is likely the central text on corporate worship in the New Testament, everything about this service is primarily for the building up of the body. Edification, not just expression.

This is where it is important to distinguish between “worship” considered in the broad sense of bringing glory to God by valuing him above all others, and a corporate worship service. Worshiping God—glorifying him, valuing him above all else—is certainly the reason we were created and the goal of the Christian life. But the corporate worship services of a church has a particular purpose that fits under the commission given to that church, namely, to make disciples. Our goal as churches is to build up disciple-worshippers who will bring God glory with the entirety of their lives, but that does not happen without intentional discipleship, and one of the primary means that God has given us to form and build those kinds of disciple-worshippers is the corporate worship of a church. In and through corporate worship, believers are built up, formed, and disciplined to be Christians who love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul,

and mind. Corporate worship is not simply a gathering of a group of individual Christians who express praise and thanks to God individually or even corporately; corporate worship is the method through which God creates mature worshipers through the means that he has ordained.

In a corporate worship service, we are not the primary actors; corporate worship is not us performing for God—that is paganism. A theology of worship that says corporate worship is about us expressing adoration for God is still anthropocentric—it’s about what we are doing. A properly theocentric theology of worship will recognize that in a corporate worship service, God is the primary actor. It is God who calls us to draw near to him; we do not invite him to come down to us. It is God who speaks to us first; only then do we respond back to him. And even our responses should be based, not on the natural, authentic expressions of our hearts, but rather our responses should be framed by the words, forms, and affections ordained for us by God in his Word. Our natural, “authentic” responses are often immature, undeveloped, fickle, sometimes even sinful, and in need of reform. Corporate worship is the means through which God forms our image of him and matures our responses toward him.

And so as church leaders, when we think about what we are going to do in a worship service, our primary concern should not be how to give voice to the natural expressions of the people in the congregation, but rather how to form and shape and disciple and edify the expressions of the people in the congregation according to the Word of God. And as church members, our primary concern in a corporate worship service should not simply be the authentic expression of worship toward God but rather how the service is edifying us to be the kind of mature disciple-worshippers Scripture commands.

Order, Not Disorder

Fourth, Paul also tells us exactly how this kind of edification in corporate worship takes place: edification in corporate worship takes place through order, not disorder. Apparently, Christians in the church at Corinth had similar expectations about corporate worship as contemporary Christians do—true worship will be spontaneous, and too much structure stifles the Holy Spirit. They were apparently extending this expectation beyond the miraculous gifts of tongues and prophecy to even singing and teaching (v. 26), which makes clear that what Paul argues in this chapter does not only apply when the miraculous gifts are in use, but to all of what constitutes gathered worship.

Paul is emphatic in verse 33: “God is not a God of confusion”—in other words, disorder—“but of peace” (v. 33). And remember, Paul is dealing here with Holy Spirit given miraculous gifts; yet even in that context, Paul insists that confusion and disorder are evidences that he is *not* working. Arguing from the greater to the lesser, if the Holy Spirit works in corporate worship through order even when he gives miraculous gifts, certainly his work is orderly once those gifts have ceased. It is a God of peace who is at work in corporate worship.

On this basis, Paul provides clear principles for order in a worship service, fully consistent with the Holy Spirit’s giving of miraculous gifts. “Only two or at most three” people may speak in tongues in any given service, “and each in turn” (v. 27). If there is no one to interpret the tongues, “let each of them keep silent” (v. 28). Only two or three prophets should speak, others

should weigh what is said (v. 29), and they should do so one at a time (v. 30). Far from expecting the Holy Spirit to sweep through the congregation, causing worshipers to be overcome with his presence, “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets” (v. 32). Far from quenching the Holy Spirit, order within corporate worship is exactly how the Holy Spirit works, desiring that “all may learn and all be encouraged” (v. 31). Thus in corporate worship, exactly because of how the Holy Spirit of God works and the purpose of corporate worship to form disciple-worshipers who will properly bring glory to God, “all things should be done decently and in order” (v. 40).

Biblical, Not Unregulated

The preceding two principles lead to an important additional implication: Corporate worship should be biblically-regulated, not unregulated. In other words, if corporate worship is God’s work upon us to make us into mature Christians, then we must be sure to use those means that he has prescribed in his Word to do so. Paul stresses the importance of biblical authority in the context of corporate worship in verses 36–38:

Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? 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.

Paul was inscripturating direct revelation from the Lord here; carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), Paul was contributing to that “prophetic word more fully confirmed” (2 Peter 1:19), the written Word of God, which always carries the final authority. Paul highlights this as well in the fact that prophecy given in a corporate worship service had to be tested (v. 29), a standard that was exactly the same for prophecy in the OT (Deut 13:1–5, 18:15–22). The written Word of God is always the final authority.

This emphasis upon biblical authority over our corporate worship applies in at least four areas. First, the elements of our worship must be regulated by the Word of God. Again, if a corporate worship service is primarily about building up believers such that their worship is acceptable to God, then we must utilize the specific means God has given us to do this.

Paul commands Timothy, in the context of teaching him how to behave in the house of God, “devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture (1 Tim 4:13). He repeats similar commands in Colossians 4:16 and 1 Thessalonians 5:27. Paul also commands Timothy to “devote yourself . . . to exhortation, to teaching” (1 Tim 4:13) and “preach the Word; be read in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). Third, Paul commands that “supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and for all who are in high positions (1 Tim 2:1). He commands the Colossians to “continue steadfastly in prayer (4:2), and to the Ephesians he admonishes, “praying at all time in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication . . . making supplication for all the saints” (6:18). A fourth biblically-prescribed element might not actually be a separate ele-

ment at all, but rather a form of Scripture reading or prayer, and that is singing. In both Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, Paul commands gathered believers to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, thereby “singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (Eph 5:19) and “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom” (Col 3:16). Fifth, Paul commanded the Corinthian church, “On the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come” (1 Cor 16:2). Although in its immediate context this refers to giving that was taken to needy believers in Jerusalem (v. 3), Paul indicates that elders should be paid (1 Tim 5:17–18), and so it is fitting that such regular, weekly giving be used for that purpose as well, in addition to caring for the particular needs of members in the congregation (Acts 6:1, 1 Tim 5:3) and other material functions of the church. Sixth, Christ commanded in his Great Commission to the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” And finally, Paul told the Corinthian church that he passed on “the Lord’s Supper” to the church, having received it from the Lord himself (1 Cor 11:20, 23).

These are the only corporate worship elements given to the church in the NT for the purpose of building up the body into mature disciple-worshippers. To add or subtract from these God-ordained elements would be to distrust the sufficiency of God’s Word in giving us what we need to equip us for every good work (2 Tim 3:17). So the first way our worship is regulated by Scripture is in the elements we choose to include.

Second, the content of our worship elements must be regulated by the Word of God. Clearly what we teach and preach, what we pray, and what we sing must contain the Word of God, or at very least express sentiments consistent with the Word of God.

Third, the forms of our worship should be regulated by the Word of God. We must remember that the Bible is not simply a static collection of theological propositions. Rather, Scripture is a collection of God-inspired literary forms that express his truth, and all of Scripture, including its aesthetic aspects, carry the weight of divine authority. Therefore, as we choose artistic forms of expression in our modern cultural context, we must be sure that the way in which those forms communicate truth correspond to the way in which Scripture itself aesthetically communicates truth.

Fourth, the order of our worship should be regulated by the Word of God. If the primary purpose of corporate worship is the edification of believers—God forming us into mature disciple-worshippers, then even the structure of our services should follow what God has given to us in Scripture. God made clear this purpose when he instituted corporate worship assemblies in the OT, establishing a structural pattern that continues also into the NT. God often calls these assemblies of worship “memorials,” meaning more than just a passive remembrance of something, but actually a reenactment of God’s works in history for his people such that the worshipers are shaped over and over again by what God has done. Beginning at Mt. Sinai (Exod 19–24), God instituted a particular order of what the OT frequently calls the “solemn assemblies” of Israel. This order reflects what I like to call a “theo-logic” in which in the assembly, God’s people reenact through the order of what they do God’s atoning work on their behalf. For sake of time, I will just summarize this structure:

God reveals himself and calls his people to worship

God's people acknowledge and confess their need for forgiveness

God provides atonement

God speaks his Word

God's people respond with commitment

God hosts a celebratory feast

This same theo-logic characterized the progression of sacrifices within the tabernacle assemblies, moving from the sin offering to the guilt offering to the burnt offering to the grain offering and finally the peace offering. The same structure appears at the dedication of Solomon's temple (2 Chron 15–17). In each case, the structure of the worship assemblies follows a theo-logical order in which the worshipers reenact the covenant relationship they have with God through the atonement he provided, culminating with a feast that celebrates the fellowship they enjoy with God because of what he has done for them.

While the particular rituals present in Hebrew worship pass away for the NT church, the book of Hebrews tells us that these OT rituals were “a copy and shadow of heavenly thing” (8:5). Thus while the shadows fade away, the theo-logic of corporate worship remains the same: we are reenacting God's atoning work on our behalf when we gather for corporate worship. Significantly, Hebrews teaches that when we gather for services of worship, through Christ we are actually joining with the real worship taking place in the heavenly Jerusalem of which those Old Testament rituals were a mere shadow. And so it is important to recognize that the two records we have in Scripture of heavenly worship also follow the same theo-logic modeled in the OT. When Isaiah was given a vision of heavenly worship in Isaiah 6, the order of what happens mirrors the same theo-logic as that given to Israel for its worship. Likewise, when John is given a similar vision of heavenly worship, the order of what happens is the same. From creation to consummation, the corporate worship of God's people is a memorial—a reenactment—of the “theo-logic” of true worship: God's call for his people to commune with him through the sacrifice of atonement that he has provided, listening to his Word, responding with praise and obedience, and culminating with a beautiful picture of perfect communion with God in the form of a feast. This reenactment in a corporate worship service of God's work for us is what will progressively edify us over time to live out our relationship with God through Christ as his mature disciple-worshippers.

This is why historic worship services, intentionally structured on the basis of this biblical theo-logic, has always followed a standard order: Worshipers begin with God's call for them to worship him, followed by adoration and praise. They then confess their sins to him and receive assurance of pardon in Christ. They thank him for their salvation, they hear his Word preached, and they respond with dedication. And the climax of all historic Christian worship has always been expression of communion with God, either through drawing near to him in prayer, or

more often in historic liturgies, through celebrating the Lord's Table. To eat at Christ's Table is the most powerful expression that Christians are accepted by him.³³ All of the Scripture readings, prayers, and songs in this order are carefully chosen for their appropriateness in a particular function within the gospel-shaped structure.³⁴

Conclusion

And so, through an argument mostly about the priority of prophecy over tongues in corporate worship, Paul gives us important principles for corporate worship that still apply even though both of those gifts have ceased:

1. Corporate worship is *corporate* worship, not *individual* worship.
2. Corporate worship is for believers, not unbelievers.
3. Corporate worship has the primary purpose of edification, not merely expression.
4. Corporate worship accomplishes edification through order, not disorder.
5. Corporate worship should be biblically-regulated, not unregulated.

³³ See James Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 23.

³⁴ Several recent volumes have created a renewed interest in such gospel-shaped liturgy, including Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); Robbie F. Castleman, *Story-Shaped Worship: Following Patterns from the Bible and History* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013); Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace: How the Church's Worship Tells the Story of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2013); James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013). For a review of these works, see Scott Aniol, "Gospel-Shaped Worship: A Review of Recent Literature," *Artistic Theologian* 2 (2013): 106–13.