

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Rules For Conducting A New Testament Worship Service I Corinthians 14:26-40

Most of us, if we are honest, do not like rules because they cramp our lifestyles. Yet, God has rules, called commandments, and whether these commands are positive or negative, they are always for our good. If we obey God's rules, we are blessed; if we do not, we are not blessed.

God has given us some specific rules for conducting a New Testament church service. Thank God He has, for the New Testament set was vibrant, dynamic and alive with excitement. It was much different from the traditional service of our day. Most of the church services of various denominations are a carry-over from Roman Catholicism and the Reformation. These traditional services are not wrong in themselves; they are not anti-biblical but they are not biblical either. Much of the Reformation for Protestants was around the issue of how to conduct a public worship service. Lutherans, Calvinists and Anabaptists disagreed. The Lutherans wanted to stay very close to the Roman Church. The Calvinists held to be more biblical but held on to many traditions. The Anabaptists wanted to scrap 1600 years of church tradition and build a church and its worship on the New Testament model. My own take is that neither the Lutherans or the Calvinists went far enough in reforming the church, and the Anabaptists went too far ending up in a lot of fanaticism.

Leon Morris, commenting on I Corinthians 14:26-40 said, "This is the most intimate glimpse of the New Testament church at worship." As we shall see, it was much different than most services we observe today. While it would be impossible to conduct a service exactly like the New Testament church, I Corinthians 14 can still be a guide or a general model of what the meeting of the church should be. Whatever we may say about the New Testament church service, it was a time when Christians exercised their spiritual gifts in order to benefit and build up one another and it was most certainly not dull and boring.

After a morning church service, a father was taking his son out the door of the church. As they approached the foyer, the little boy saw some plaques on the wall with pictures of men and women in various military uniforms. On the plaques were names of men and women of the church who had given their lives in war for their country. The little boy asked, "Daddy, what are those things on the wall?" The father replied, "They are names of men and women who died in the service." The little boy asked, "Which service, the morning or the evening?"

RULES FOR THE USE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS IN GENERAL 14:26

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. At this time, there may have been as many as 500 Christians at Corinth, and it would have been

difficult to have Christians participating in the service consistently. Many scholars think the church met occasionally as one body but broke up into various homes with an elder presiding. It may be that there were two types of meetings in the first century - one being the small, intimate gathering of about twenty in a home where spiritual gifts could be more readily used, the other were more casual meetings where preachers and teachers would address the whole body at once. Such a meeting would be that found in Acts 20 where Paul met with the Christians at Troas. This meeting began around nine o'clock at night and went past midnight, causing Eutychus to fall asleep and fall out the window. Even the Apostle Paul put a few parishioners to sleep. We can't be sure whether the meeting referred to here is the large gathering or the small gatherings of the church.

The word "everyone" is significant because it indicates that various Christians in the church contributed in the meeting. This cannot be pressed to mean that every member of the group always had something to contribute, but it does mean that any of them ought to be expected to take part in the service if God so led.

The two words which best describe New Testament worship are spontaneity and participation. Tertullian (160-225) gives us a hint about worship in his day. He was an immoral lawyer who came to Christ. He was a radical and for a time was involved in the Montanist cult but later came back into fellowship with the established, institutionalized church.

In our Christian meetings we have plenty of songs, verses, sentences and proverbs. After hand-washing and bringing in the lights, each Christian is asked to stand forth and sing, as best he can, a hymn to God, either of his own composing or one from the Holy Scriptures (Tertullian).

The Bible teaches the priesthood of the believer, and part of the Christian's responsibility is to participate in worship, not just be a spectator. Corporate worship is not where people come to be entertained by other people up front. Part of the spontaneity is people actively and wholeheartedly participating in worship.

If Paul were writing the average congregation today, his advice would have to work _____. Rather than an unstructured spontaneity that creates bedlam, he would be confronted with a well-regulated order of worship that often creates boredom. The smallest of churches often prints or mimeographs for its members a program of everything that is going to happen during the hour and the sequence in which it will take place, and once it has been printed it becomes a sacred thing to those who planned it. And the likelihood of the Spirit's leading anyone to say or do something that is not anticipated on Tuesday when the stencil was cut is very remote (Chafin, I and II Corinthians).

Some have suggested that this verse virtually eliminates the professional clergy (teaching-elder). For sure there was much participation by the laity but that did not eliminate the teaching of the Word from the clergy. According to First Timothy an elder must be "able to teach" (3:2) and a teaching elder is told "command and teach these things" (4:11) and he is to "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture and to teaching" (4:14). There are other important verses for pastors.

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching (I Tim. 5:17).

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction (II Tim. 4:2).

When the saints gathered, they had a psalm, which is a song accompanied by a musical instrument, probably a harp or a mandolin. It might even imply that this was the person's own composition. Another Christian would give some teaching or doctrine and apply it to the life. Another would have a revelation in that he would bring truth to bear that would declare the mind of God through Holy Spirit impressions. Still another would speak in a tongue and whether that be a foreign language or an unintelligible utterance, it had to be interpreted.

It is safe to say that while these services were done in a proper and orderly manner, there was no settled format to them. There was a spontaneity but no routine order of worship. The Holy Spirit guided the meeting..

This might give us some justification for changing the order of worship in our traditional services so as to add spice and variety, keeping our attention on what is happening. Worship services should not be routine. They should be exciting. We all need spontaneity and expectancy in worship. However, nothing should ever be done to force spiritual gifts or manipulate people.

Several years ago, Carol and I attended the Toronto Blessing. That night there must have been 4000 people there, most of whom were from out of town. They came to observe the so-called blessing. The tragedy was that the staff were forcing the spectacular and it was obvious. The staff were slaying each other in the Spirit. The preacher that night was even saying that the blessing was waning and they had to keep it going through greater faith, prayer and effort. In my opinion this was a display of the flesh. I do not question that something powerful had happened at the Vineyard in Toronto some 22 months before, but the power was gone. Yet, they were trying to keep a dead things from dying. How sad. Everything which was done in the New Testament worship service was to edify, to build up, to instruct, to exhort, to comfort, to uplift the saints. There should be a sense of excitement and anticipation when the saints gather together to love their God more and to exhort one another to love and good works.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:24-25).

All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. The ultimate goal is the strengthening and maturing of the believers in any given church. It is done by using the means which God has given to accomplish this goal.

RULES FOR SPEAKING IN TONGUES 14:27-28

If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. While Paul was not against the use of tongues in the local church, he did not encourage it either. Paul clearly states that if people speak in tongues only two or three are to participate and they are never to speak all at once but in succession. Tongues did not have to happen every worship service. There must be no duplication or multiplicity of tongues speakers. Only one could speak at any give time. There was to be an interpreter whenever a person spoke in tongues. If there was no interpretation, then this was not a work of God. The interpretation was for the whole congregation so they should know what was being said.

There are charismatic who often have a number of people speaking in so-called tongues all at once and no interpreters. This is contrary to God's rules for the use of public tongues.

This verse does not say that people have to speak in tongues every week in the church service, but the rule is when tongues are used, they must be controlled and no more than three can speak.

When I came to candidate at HBF eleven years ago, one of the questions the pulpit committee asked me was, "If somebody in the church service began speaking in tongues what would you do?" My answer was that I would not panic. I would not call for the deacons to throw the person out. I would ask, "Is there an interpretation?" If there was, I would listen and receive what was said as information. If there was no interpretation, I would say, "Brother, there is no interpretation; therefore, your tongue is invalid." If he continued to speak then I would call for the deacons to politely remove the brother. I apparently gave the right answer because I was offered the pulpit of HBF.

If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God. Tongues whether a foreign language or a prayer language were never used in public without a interpreter. If there is no interpreter, a person can use this gift of tongues in his own life so that he is praising God in his spirit, in his thoughts, but not in words.

RULES FOR PROPHESYING 14:29-33

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. Only two or three prophets were to speak and this was probably done to keep down the length of the meeting. Again it does not say that people have to prophesy every Sunday, but when they do, no more than three should do it. Those who pass judgment are probably those with the gift of discerning spirits, being able to tell whether the prophecy is from God, the flesh or evil spirit.

And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. If a person prophesying sees another prophet is led to talk, then he is to let him do it. No one prophet is to take over the meeting. Notice carefully that when people were prophesying they were not in a trance or a frenzy. It was controlled prophecy which could be stopped and started at will.

For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. Again the ultimate purpose of prophesy is to instruct and encourage true believers in Christ.

The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. Those prophesying are not under some uncontrollable, irresistible force. He or she could stop or start whenever the person wanted to do so.

If a person who claims to prophesy says, "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 from God," is pure nonsense. The prophet could always control himself.

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. Apparently, all the prophets were trying to speak at once and so were the people who spoke in tongues. Paul's point is that God never creates confusion and disorder. God has given all the spiritual gifts and all can be controlled so no confusion abounds. Where there is confusion, the demons are lurking.

RULES FOR WOMEN 14:34-35

As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission as the Law says. Now we come to a section where angels fear to tread. Whatever else we may say about verses 34 and 35, we must put them in the context of I Corinthians 14. These verses in context are speaking about tongues and prophesying in the public meeting of the church. Therefore, when it says, "Women should remain silent in the churches" it is somehow related to tongues and prophesy.

There are some possible views on verses 34 and 35, none of which will satisfy everybody. First, women are to never speak in church period, but this is clearly contradicted by I Corinthians 11:5 which allows women to pray and prophesy in church with their heads covered. Second, women are not to interrupt the preaching, but this context is not about preaching. Third, because women were separated from men in New Testament services, they sat together in a designated section and there was tendency to chatter and gossip during the service, but this view is totally removed from the context of tongues and prophecy. Fourth, women are excluded from tongues speaking only in the public service; that is, they can do anything except speak in tongues. This view might eliminate a lot of modern abuses of tongues, but the immediate context is about prophecy. Fifth, women are not to participate in the question and answer time which was provided after the sermon in New Testament times, but this does not seem to fit the context either.

Perhaps the best perspective, therefore, is to take Paul's commands as prohibiting women from participating in the final decisions about the legitimacy of any given prophecy. This act would be usurping authority over men who are to be the spiritual leaders. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent (I Tim. 2:12). Women are not to rule over or teach men in a public

setting of the church, and discerning legitimate prophecy would be a form of usurping authority over men.

This verse does not say a woman cannot prophecy in the public meeting of the church. Nor does this verse teach a woman can never teach adult men the Bible, for surely Priscilla taught Apollos. But what it implies is that women are not to be the final judges on the truth or error of prophecy.

If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in church. Apparently whenever a prophecy was given, there would be a dialogue with the male leaders as to the legitimacy of that prophecy. If a woman had any questions, she should keep silent in the church and ask her husband at home. In so doing she would be acknowledging the leadership of her husband.

Surely this does not mean a woman can never speak in church. If so, then she could not pray, sing, read responsive readings, repeat the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed or say "Amen" at the end of a prayer. Obviously the Apostle Paul had a particular situation in view and that was the woman should have no authority over the issue of the legitimacy of prophecy.

RULES FOR THE REBELLIOUS 14:36-38

Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? This is clearly satire, for Paul gives a sarcastic statement about these Corinthians. They thought they were unique, having special gifts. They were not the only church around. No other churches, however, were experiencing the abuses of tongues and prophecy like the Corinthians. These abuses were bringing confusion and disorder. They should have been following the example of the other churches but were not.

If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. Those who spoke in tongues or those who prophesied in the Corinthian Church thought of themselves as super-spiritual and superior to other Christians who did not have these gifts. They were to stop their pride and recognize what Paul has written are the commands of the Lord.

Truly spiritual people will always recognize the authority of Scripture. Today there are many Christians who are having experiences which are quite spectacular. Yet, when you point out from the Bible that what they are experiencing is not found in the Bible or even contrary to the Bible, they insist on their feelings or experiences rather than conformity to the inspired, infallible Bible. We know that the Spirit of God never operates contrary to the Word of God. Those who are truly spiritual will recognize the authority of Scripture and will bring all experiences to the touchstone of Scripture.

If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. Literally this says, "If any one is ignorant, let him be ignored." If a person willfully wants to stay ignorant and refuses to acknowledge these commandments of the Lord concerning tongues and prophecy, let him stay in the state of ignorance and do not try to dispute the point. Ignore him. In other words, do not pay any attention to him. Paul would neither attempt to convince him nor waste his time in disputing the point.

While we must treat our charismatic brethren with love and respect, there comes a time when we must say to these dear brothers and sisters, 'We love you, but we think

your abuses in spiritual gifts are wrong and hurtful to the body of Christ, we ask you to take your experiences and put them to the touchstone of Scripture. If you will not do this, then we will ignore you in this one area of your Christian practice."

RULES FOR CONDUCT 14:39-40

Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. Paul was not against speaking in biblical tongues in the public assembly, but he would much rather the people prophesy.

But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. Whatever is done in any church meeting is to be done orderly and discreetly so as to bring the most glory to the Lord and to edify the whole church. Any worship service which is out of order and out of control is not of God. It does not glorify God but exalts man.

CONCLUSION

We began this message by talking about rules for Christians, but God also has some rules for non-Christians. They are not like, "I don't drink, smoke, dance or chew, and I don't go with the girls who do!" No, God is indifferent to these kinds of things.

God's first rule for non-Christian men and women is that all are sinful before a holy God because they hate, lie, cheat, envy, lust, gossip, lose their tempers, commit adultery, get involved in premarital sex, disrespect parents and a hundred other things which the Bible declares are sin. God's second rule is that unless a man or woman gets the forgiveness for sins, he or she will perish for all eternity because he or she stands under the wrath of a holy God. God's third rule is that He sent Jesus Christ into this world to die for sinful people and all who believe in Christ by faith, accepting Him as Lord and Savior, shall have their sins forgiven and be granted entrance into heaven at death because they have eternal life. God's fourth rule is that our good works cannot save us. Baptism, church membership, humanitarianism, education or whatever cannot save us. Only Christ can save us as we lay hold of Him by faith. These are God's rules for salvation and He will never change them. Will you obey God's rules or reject them? Whatever you do will determine your eternal destiny.