

CHAPTER 10

THE REGULATION OF TONGUES IN THE ASSEMBLY

1 Corinthians 14:27-40

Paul, in correcting the misuse of tongues in Corinth, set forth certain regulations for the proper use of tongues in the assembly. The governing principles behind all of these regulations are summed up in verse 26 (“Let all things be done unto edifying”) and in verse 40 (“Let all things be done decently and in order”). Paul did not forbid the Corinthians to speak with tongues (verse 39) but he did forbid any tongues-speaking contrary to the rules which he set forth.

If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret (1 Corinthians 14:27).

Regulation 1—No more than three people could speak in tongues on any one occasion.

Regulation 2—The tongues-speakers must speak

one after another in succession, not all at once.

In other words, they were to speak one at a time (each in turn) and not over three in all were to speak.

Regulation 3—Whenever tongues-speaking occurs, there must also be the interpretation of the tongues.

But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God (1 Corinthians 14:28).

Regulation 4—If there is no interpreter, then the tongues-speaker must keep silent.

This verse indicates that the gift of tongues was something that could be controlled by the speaker. It was in his power to shut it off! If tongues were misused, he was responsible. The spirits of the tongues-speakers were subject to the tongues-speakers.

Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted (1 Corinthians 14:29-31).

Paul now gives some regulations for those who were gifted as prophets. There was a great need for spiritual discernment when the prophets spoke, lest a false prophet should be found in their midst (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:10—the gift of “discerning of spirits”). Also there were to be no private sessions (verses 30-31).

Let all profit from the prophet!

And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (1 Corinthians 14:32-33).

The exercise of the gift of prophecy was not something out of the prophet's control. The prophet could never say, "I could not help it! The Holy Spirit came upon me and I just had to speak!" No, the spirits of the prophets were subject to the prophets. The person who exercised the gift of prophecy was not overwhelmed by some external force which carried him beyond his control. On the contrary, he was able to speak or wait his turn or refrain from speaking. He knew what he was doing and he was accountable for his actions. The gifted man was responsible for how he used the gift.

Unger has explained verse 32 as follows: "The prophet (or the speaker in tongues) when exercising his gift is not under an irresistible compulsion or force, so that he is unable to conform to common sense regulations and orderly conduct."²⁰

If the prophecy were to get out of control, then the prophet would be blamed, "for God is not the author of confusion" (verse 33). God must not be blamed for the Corinthian problem. The Corinthians themselves were responsible for the confusion in their assembly.

Not even the devil could be blamed for the disorder and confusion in Corinth. In these chapters, Paul never

suggested that the Corinthian tongues-speaking was of the devil, though certainly Satan was pleased by the havoc produced in this carnal assembly.

The gift of tongues, even at Corinth, was a God-given gift. God enabled some of the Corinthian believers to speak in a language they had never learned. Paul never implied that the gift was illegitimate or spurious. He never said that the Corinthians did not have the real gift of tongues. In fact, if the gift of tongues at Corinth were not genuine, then it is unthinkable that Paul would have said, "forbid not to speak with tongues" (verse 39; cf. verses 5,18).

Though the gift was legitimate, Paul taught that it was the least edifying of all the gifts (1 Corinthians 12:28), and of little value compared to the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14:2-3). Paul declared that tongues were of no edificational value, unless there was interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:27-28).

The problem was not with the gift. The problem was that the Corinthians were abusing and misusing the gift God had given them. They failed to exercise the gift of tongues in a decent and orderly way (1 Corinthians 14:40). The confusion came because the carnal Corinthians were operating not according to love, but according to the flesh (cf. James 3:16 and 1 Corinthians 3:3-4).

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands

at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

Regulation 5—The women were not to speak in tongues in the assembly.

What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant (1 Corinthians 14:36-38).

These regulations were to be heeded and obeyed as if Christ Himself had given them. In fact, Christ did give them! These are the commandments of the Lord. Beware lest some have a “red-letter edition” understanding of the New Testament. The entire New Testament should be in *red* (cf. John 16:12) and should be *read* as authoritative (2 Timothy 3:16).

Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues (1 Corinthians 14:39).

Notice the superior edificational value of prophecy:
Verse 1—“But much more desire that ye may prophesy”
Verse 5—“But much more I desire that ye prophesied”
Verse 22—“Prophecy is for those who believe”
Verse 39—“Covet [zealously seek] to prophesy”
On the other hand, Paul did not forbid tongues-

speaking. Tongues had a God-given purpose and place as a sign-gift (verse 22).

The command, “forbid not to speak with tongues,” was written about 55 A.D.—*before* tongues had ceased. When tongues ceased, then the command was no longer in effect. How can a gift be exercised when the gift is no longer given? If tongues were no longer needed after 70 A.D. (as discussed in chapter 9), then since 70 A.D. no one has had the God-given charismatic gift of tongues. So the command, “forbid not to speak with tongues,” no longer applies today. One cannot forbid a person to do something that is no longer done! That would be like a person today forbidding a prophet to speak (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:20). Can someone forbid a prophet to speak when there are no longer any prophets? But in Paul’s day (55 A.D.) the gift of tongues was still in effect and was to be regulated, but was not to be forbidden or hindered.²¹

Let all things be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40).

This verse implies that the Corinthians were doing things indecently and out of order! God’s people must know how to conduct themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and base of the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). Only then will the living God manifest His glorious Person and Presence in and through the assembly (1 Timothy 3:16).