

Order in the Church!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 February 2025

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] At the end of February, I'm going to start attending an art class on Thursday, my day off, because I want to learn how to draw. I'd always thought that the ability to draw was something you were born with, and some of us, like myself, weren't born with it, and so that even though I wanted to draw, I'd never be able to advance beyond stick men. Although, to be fair, stick men brought the English artist L.S. Lowry great fame and fortune. But recently, I learned, I should have known really, that there are fundamental rules governing art, the principles of line, perspective, colour, and so on. And I'm led to believe that if you can master some of these rules, anyone can draw.

So I've signed up to a 14-week course, the last week being an exhibition of our work. So by the end of May, I had better be able to draw, or I'll make rather a fool of myself.

You see, everything in life is governed by rules. And these may be conscious rules or unconscious rules. There are conscious rules of government and state, but there are unconscious rules of marriage and relationship. There are the conscious rules of our duties at work. They are the unconscious rules of our responsibilities in friendship. A life with no rules is a chaos. Imagine one day you wake up, and because you don't want to live by the rules, you get dressed and then have a shower, but the next day you have a shower before you wake up. To get the most out of life, you see, we do need rules.

The church needs rules, especially in its services of public worship. The God of peace is not glorified by a chaotic, disorganized, unruly church. In 1 Corinthians 14 verse 40, the apostle Paul writes of the church's public worship, everything should be done decently and in order. It should all be done decently and in order. Our public services of worship should be governed by decency and order.

There must be rules lest there be no decency and there be disorder. 1 Corinthians chapters 11 through 14 are all about decency and order in the public worship of the early church in Corinth. And over the last few weeks, we have explored the different rules Paul has set down for the Christians in Corinth. We've set down principles for us to apply today.

[2 : 51] We've only been able to set down these principles for two reasons. First, this is very important. We do not know what a worship service in Corinth looked like. Didn't look like anything we have today.

So, we're trying to reconstruct the chaos of Corinth's worship services by mirror reading from Paul's instructions here. And secondly, remember, we're living in 21st century Glasgow, not 1st century Corinth.

Paul wrote this letter to a particular church at a particular time in a particular location, so the best we can do is to extract the principles he lays down. Now, last Sunday evening, if you remember, from 1 Corinthians 14, 1 through 25, we laid down five principles for public worship. It's about love, others, understanding, gospel, and unbelievers. This week, as we explore the second half of this chapter, from verses 26 to verse 40, we want to explore three more principles for how we are to conduct ourselves as a church in public worship. Order in verses 26 through 33, submission verses 34 through 35, and authority verses 36 through 40. Remember, this is all governed by Paul's command in verse 40, all things should be done decently and in order. If we want to paint a work of art for Christ our

Savior in public worship, which glorifies him, we need to obey these fundamental rules and principles. So, first of all then, from verse 26 through 33, order, order. Now, we all have our preferences for the kind of church we attend. My preference is for formality and liturgy. Your preference may be to be less formal and more spontaneous, but whatever our preference is, I am certain that none of us would have enjoyed the public worship of the first century Corinthian church. As we mirror read verses 26 through 33, all we can say is that their worship services were a chaotic

mess, largely caused, as Kirk rightly said, by the pride of those who had been gifted with extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit, the gifts of prophecy and tongues. This section is governed by the words in verse 33,

God is not a God of confusion, but of peace. What we read in the rest of the section prior to that is summarized by one word, confusion. Everyone wants to be the front man, whether that's the person who wants to sing or preach or prophesied, speak in a tongue or interpret a tongue. There's no order, there's no structure to the service. It's a free for all. I am led to believe that one of the favorite British TV channels Americans love to watch is the parliamentary channel, because in their eyes, the way we do things in the House of Commons seems rather chaotic, and to be fair, if you watch it without knowing the procedure, it does seem rather strange. While one MP is speaking, other MPs are randomly standing up, waving papers in the air and shouting, only for the Speaker of the House to stand up and shout, followed by an appropriate sarcastic put-down. It wasn't all that different in the church in Corinth. The service of worship was a mishmash of people showing off. They spoke over each other, immediately after each other. The word silent is used twice in this section, verse 28, verse 30, probably by design, because the one thing there never was in their public worship was silence.

[7:19] No one had a chance to think about what had just been said. There was no time for reflection, because the moment one person stopped speaking, another started immediately. So, what we have in this section are Paul's rules. Again, in verse 26, he lays down the principle, let all things be done for building up.

Building up who? Building others up. Not for one's own benefit, but for the benefit of others. How can anyone in the church possibly grow in their faith while they're listening to a cacophony of noise? If someone speaks in a tongue, there must be an interpreter present. If not, then that person should be silent. Of course, they won't want to be silent. They'll want to parade their extraordinary gift. But if others in the church are to be built up in the faith, they must be silent. Again, if there's a prophecy spoken, it must be weighed up by other prophets in the congregation, lest what is being said is false. False teaching builds no one up, it just tears everyone down. There is to be a sequential ordering of speakers, one by one. They are not to speak over each other. If we hear ten voices saying ten things, we won't learn one thing. And it's no use for the prophet to say, but I have a word from the Lord. I must speak this word. For as Paul says, the spirit of prophets, the spirit of prophets, in verse 32, are subject to prophets. In other words, control yourself. So, from these verses, we have four mini principles of order governing our public worship service. Appropriate silence, discernment, sequence, self-control. Just to clear one thing up, Paul sets no time restraint on a service of worship. We might suppose that if services in Corinth or in the early church were only one hour long, he'd say, you can't do all these things because an hour is not long enough. We have no idea of how long a worship service lasted in the early church. It could have been many hours, perhaps a whole morning or a whole evening. We'd certainly have all got tickets in the car park across the road. Paul's concern was not with time, but with content.

[10:06] The content of the service must be decent and ordered. Appropriate silence, discernment of what is being said, sequence, and self-control. To the extent that we hold these things together in Crow Road Free Church, we're doing well. We may be criticized by others for being over-formal and over-structured, but from this section in 1 Corinthians 14, is it not safer to err on our side than to allow chaos to rule?

But then, of course, someone may object. But if you have order and structure and sequence in the service, doesn't that mean that you are restricting the freedom of the Holy Spirit to be spontaneous? Doesn't that mean that you're restricting the freedom of the Holy Spirit to be spontaneous? You know, really? Really? It's such a childish argument. Do the deacons restrict the freedom of the Holy Spirit by setting the heating in our building to go on an hour before everyone arrives? Do the musicians restrict the Holy Spirit by practicing the Psalms and hymns beforehand? Does the preacher restrict the freedom of the Holy Spirit by preparing his sermon the week before? I'd like to think that the Holy Spirit is working in me as I work away in my study during the week. Next time someone objects to the formality and structure of our services by saying, but surely you're restricting the freedom of the Holy Spirit, just ask them whether they studied to pass their exams in school or merely depended upon the Holy Spirit to give them the answers there and then. Paul's emphasis in this section is on how God wants to work through order in worship, not through chaos. God's a God of peace, not of confusion. He is to be worshipped according to the rules of peace and

order, not chaos and confusion. Now, of course, peace and order must not descend into coldness and over formality. We want to pray against such stoniness in our worship.

Rather, as we come to worship with hearts prepared to worship, we rejoice in the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the scriptures we study, because after all, we want to paint a work of art for Christ our Savior in worship that glorifies Him. Not a hodgepodge of scribbles. So, the first of our principles is order. Second of our principles, submission from verse 34 to 35.

This is what I'm thankful I've got five senior ministers in front of me, so you can be a barricade, just in case anyone wants to get to me. Now, these are some of the hardest verses, I think, in the Bible to understand and even harder for our modern world to swallow.

As in all the churches of the saints, the woman should keep silent in the churches. It grates against our sense of fair play for Paul to say such seemingly misogynistic things.

[13:29] But then we must remember that our age is very different from that of first century Corinth. Back then, it wasn't only tongue speakers who were responsible for disrupting services of worship, but also the woman. If there is to be silence, discernment, sequence, and self-control, there must be instruction for the woman also. Now, remember, Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians to address particular problems faced by that particular church. The particular problems the church in Jerusalem faced were very different than those the church in Corinth faced. The relationship between men and women, or more particularly husbands and wives, was an issue in Corinth, whereas it didn't seem to be in Philippi or Thessalonica or Jerusalem. Add to this the problem, as I said at the beginning, we do not know what a service of worship in Corinth looked like. We cannot reconstruct it. It's too long ago. So, before we look at this text, I want to set down a principle of biblical interpretation that we all need to listen to and get into our heads. Namely, a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text. I'll say that again. A text without a context is a pretext is a pretext for a proof text. In other words, we need to understand the context in which something is said for us to understand what it means. Journalists are experts at taking something out of context and making it mean the opposite of what it was actually meant by the speaker.

We need to understand the context of this prohibition on woman speaking. Women are to be silent, it is said here in this text, because they should be in submission, as the law says. The Old Testament law did not say that a woman should be silent, but that she should be in submission to her husband. We're back here in 1 Corinthians 11 territory where we heard a few weeks ago where it talks about a woman's submission to her husband by wearing a symbol of that submission. In this case, something on her head. In our case, perhaps a wedding ring or some other symbol. In verse 35, Paul goes on to say, if there is anything they desire to learn, let them ask their husbands at home, for it's shameful for a woman to speak in church. Now, look at the context of verse 35. It would seem that the speaking of women in the church was related to their desire to learn. They wanted to learn, so they spoke. The speaking Paul was forbidding was not connected with prophesying or praying, but with their desire to learn something. Rather than disrupting the service of worship by talking in order to learn, they should wait until they get home and then ask their husbands what was said and what it meant. That, it seems to me, is a reasonable restatement of these verses.

As a mark of submission to their husbands, women should not disrupt the service by asking them questions. Rather, they should wait until they get home and then ask their husbands.

Well, if we take the authority of the Bible seriously, and we do, we cannot just throw this part of the Bible out and say, well, that was Paul, not Jesus. It doesn't really matter. There are three various interpretations of this verse given in conservative, reformed evangelicalism. Let me state them each and give a brief analysis. The first is to view these verses as a blanket ban on women opening their mouths in church. They should be absolutely silent. Now, this view has much to commend it, especially when we take it into conjunction with what Paul will later say in 1 Timothy 2 about forbidding women to teach or have authority over a man. But there are three big problems with that view. First, if women are to be absolutely silent in church, why are they encouraged to sing? Singing is speech. That's not forbidden.

So, it cannot be a blanket ban on women using their vocal cords in church. Second, in 1 Corinthians 11, verse 5, as we saw together a few weeks ago, Paul makes provision for women praying or prophesying in public. This was something that was already happening. Paul does not forbid its practice.

[18 : 20] He only insists that when they do so, they should wear a mark of submission to their husbands. So, to ban women opening their mouths in church in 1434 contradicts what Paul said in 11.5.

Third, and perhaps most tellingly, the contributions of women in the Bible are very much valued. Think of how Miriam, sister of Moses, in Exodus 15.20, lifts up her voice in the assembly of Israel and sings her songs of praise to God. Think of Deborah, judge of Israel, in Judges chapter 4, verse 5, the Deborah, the Deborah who sings her famous song. Think of Hannah, 1 Samuel 2, who prays so wonderfully in the temple. Think of the courageous prophetess, Huldah, in 2 Chronicles 34, who stands before King Josiah and prophesies disaster on Judah. Think of Mary, the mother of our Lord, and her famous magnificat. Paul, trained as a Pharisee, was an expert in the Old Testament. He would have been aware of these examples. To place a blanket ban on women contributing is to contradict the values set upon them in the Bible. So, for these reasons, together with another one I don't want to go into, and with the principle of interpretation that we must place a text in its context, Paul here is not placing a ban on women opening their mouths in public worship. Rather, he is referring to another aspect of their speech. The second and third interpretations are reconstructions of the worship service in Corinth.

Reconstruction. They're trying to go back to what it looked like. Both view men and women as seated separately in the church, just as they would have been in a Jewish synagogue. So, in our church here, we have two aisles, one there, one there. In the church in Corinth, there would have been one straight down the middle. Men would have sat over there, and women would have sat over there. They were separated by an aisle. I'm not sure. Is this still the way it works in synagogues today? I'm not sure. It is certainly the way it works in other religions. Men on that side, women on that side. That's the way it was in the church in Corinth.

To speak to one's husband required one to shout across that empty aisle. So, this to me seems very reasonable and historically accurate. Men would have sat over there, women would have sat over there separately in the early Corinthian church. So, that's in common between the second and third interpretation. So, in the second interpretation, during the service of worship, wives were shouting across to their husbands across the aisle and asking them what was meant by the person at the front who was prophesying or preaching or speaking in tongues. Their loud voices asking loud questions were a distraction to everybody else. They couldn't hear what was being said through the din of all the questions. So, Paul is telling the woman, be silent until you get home, and then you can ask your husband what was said and what was meant. That's the second interpretation.

[21 : 47] The third interpretation, proposed by the Reformed Christian Middle Eastern scholar of the first century, Kenneth Bailey, and popularized really by Amy Bird, co-host of the Reformation 21 podcast, The Mortification of Spinn. What a great name for a podcast.

Woman in Mediterranean culture in the first century learned very differently from men. Women were stuck in the house.

Men were out in the marketplaces doing business. Women were stuck in the house. Men were out in the marketplaces doing their business. Women tended to learn, therefore, by gossiping.

And chatting with other wives. In this reconstruction, while the person at the front was prophesying or preaching or speaking in a tongue, the women over here were chatting loudly to each other. Because that's how they learned. They chatted with each other and gossiped through things with each other, asking each other the meaning of what was being said. Now, I remember watching television with my granny.

[23 : 01] And she would unfailingly add her own commentary to the TV program. She would say, Did he really do that? What did he say? Vov, vov. She would literally speak over the program.

And although I loved her, just for those few minutes, I kind of wish she'd be quiet. That's the idea here. Because that's the way women learned in first century in the Mediterranean area, the women were adding a running commentary to the service, perhaps asking each other what was meant, or saying, I don't agree with that, or what kind of guy is that?

And Paul is telling these women, Be silent. Don't go asking each other what was meant by it, wait until you get home, and then ask your husband. Now, those are the three present interpretations in Reformed Evangelical Conservative circles.

I personally favor interpretation three, although we don't know for sure which one was right. The point is, a service of worship in the church is not like going to the cinema where you can talk loud

through the whole film and ruin it for everyone else.

I hate it when people do that, don't you? Paul here is talking about women submitting to the authority of their husbands in public worship, especially, especially if he should be the one at the front of the church.

[24 : 30] Okay, the challenge for us as husbands here is this. Suppose on the way home in the car tonight, your wife says to you, what on earth was that preacher talking about?

Would you be spiritually intelligent enough to be able to explain it to her? Submission.

Well, then lastly, from verse 36 to verse 40, authority, authority. Well, in these first 14 chapters of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul has been laying down solid principles about many different aspects of orderly practice in this church.

Many of these principles created with the Corinthians, and let's face it, they create with us as well, right? They were, after all, as Kirk points out, a proud people, and as David Parker pointed out a couple of weeks ago, an unloving people at times.

They were an imperfect church with a perfect saviour, but chief among their imperfections was their pride and lovelessness. They thought, no one does the church better than we do.

[25 : 41] We are so spiritual that we can speak in tongues. We are so liberated from gender stereotypes that, well, men and women can do exactly the same things. We're free enough to have intimate relations with whoever we want, whenever we want, however we want.

In reality, there were a proud people who didn't want to take a telling. None of us like to be told that we're wrong. That is part of the Christian life. If we are unteachable by those who are more mature Christians than we are, it's a sign that we are proud before God and we need repentance.

In these last few verses of 1 Corinthians 14, Paul is telling these Christians to listen to him and to listen to what he's saying, to obey him.

Decency and order must be observed in every service of worship, not because that's Paul's preference and not because necessarily that's the way it's done in all the other churches, but because Paul, as an apostle, is issuing them a command from the Lord.

In other words, what he says has all the authority of God's voice. He highlights their pride by asking them in verse 36 sarcastically, what was it from you the word of God came?

[27 : 04] Are you the only ones that's reached? Because, you see, the Corinthian Christians were acting as though they alone had it right and everyone else had it wrong. How often we act like them.

Do we in the Free Church of Scotland honestly believe that every other church in the whole world is mistaken and that we alone are right?

To think that way demonstrates pride and a lack of humility. It's good to be persuaded of our theological positions, but to be arrogant enough to say that we are the most perfect church in the world?

We have much to learn. However, what gives Paul the authority to speak the way he has about all these controversial issues is what he says in verse 37.

I'm writing to you a command of the Lord. He's speaking to them the words of Jesus, the word of God. This is what must govern their beliefs and practices.

[28 : 06] Not what makes them feel good. Not what makes them look cool in their community. Not what feeds their pride, but what is written in the word of God. Now, we don't have modern day apostles, but their writings are in the Bible.

That is why we are to take our belief and practices from the written word of God, the Bible.

Ultimately, if you want to know what it means to be evangelical and reformed, the Bible is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the way we do church.

God alone has the authority to tell us what to believe and how to live. Just like there are rules which govern art, there are fundamental rules governing the way we do church.

I'd like to think that the way we do church in Crow Road doesn't stretch back to 1843 and the disruption of the free church, nor to 1560 in the Scottish Reformation, but to the first century and the production of the New Testament.

I'm not arrogant enough to suggest that we've got everything right, especially the most important thing, the state of our hearts before God as we engage in public worship, because it's the state of our hearts before this body of teaching which is the litmus test of our spiritual discipleship of Jesus.

[29 : 30] But our authority for all these things is to be the Word of God. If He, Jesus, our Lord, gave Himself on the cross for us, and if we are recipients of His extravagant grace, there is no place for

self-centered pride in our services of worship.

Rather, ordering ourselves according to the Word of God so that we give maximum glory to the Lord of glory and fixing our hearts on worshiping Him, we will give Him the praise He is due.

This is, after all, not our church. It is Jesus' church. And we want to give it back to Him as a beautiful work of art, our offering of praise to the Lord of glory, through the Lord of glory. Thank you.