

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Decent and Orderly: What does This Mean?

Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order. (1 Corinthians 14:39-40)

Throughout this thesis on spiritual gifts Paul has emphasized the spiritual value of "Prophesying," speaking simple understandable words that edify one's hearers. If something fulfills the Lord's design for a spiritual gift, growing believers into stronger believers, should the person with that spiritual gift not long to use his gift to help those around him? We normally think of "Covet" in terms of a sinful desire, as in the Ten Commandments' prohibition against coveting your neighbor's possessions—or wife. The word translated "covet" in this passage identifies strong desire, specifically, to be zealous toward the activity. Why would you approach your spiritual gift half-heartedly? Is it any wonder that hungry sheep are not moved when a preacher devotes his preaching time to an impersonal lecture? Granted, a preacher may take his passion over the top and become affectively emotional, making himself more the centerpiece of his sermon than the Lord. However, when a man clearly shows that he feels some fire toward the thoughts that he presents to a congregation, we should expect that people in the congregation will be inclined to catch some of his fire.

...*forbid not to speak with tongues.* In this chapter Paul spent ample time outlining acceptable and objectionable situations relative to speaking in a foreign language. He will not invest such effort for clarity in his instructions only to contradict his points in the end. It may be that a godly believer who is not familiar with the dominant language in a church's culture has highly edifying thoughts that the church needs to hear. Paul already set forth the rules for giving the brother audience and thereby giving the church the benefit of the brother's spiritual light. If a man cannot speak or preach in the dominant language of the church, provide him a translator so that he can communicate his words to the church to edification.

Our church has been blessed over the last year by having a dear brother from the Philippines live among us. He speaks limited English, but he has demonstrated a heart for the Lord and a passion for the truth of Scripture that has blessed those of us who spend time with him. As I have written on this particular theme, I have actually lived through the experience. Recently Brother Danny and I had a very enlightening discussion regarding the language question. We discussed another Filipino preacher who presently lives in northern California.

This brother has lived in our country for many years. Our English speaking culture has become his home and the field of his ministry. He no doubt worked long and hard to grow his fluency in our English language. Today he preaches so that our people understand him clearly and are edified by his preaching. Early in my visiting with "Our" Brother Danny I suggested that, if he thought his ministry future was in our country, he should enroll in a class for English as a second language so that he could grow in his familiarity with our language. He considered this advice, but then came to believe that the Lord had assigned him to labor in his homeland, the Philippines. He has blessed us richly by his time among us in personal conversation and fellowship. God speed his labors. Brother Danny has helped me appreciate Paul's lesson in First Corinthians 14 from a practical perspective.

Let all things be done decently and in order. Paul often teaches detailed specific lessons and follows those details with a precise and succinct statement of the principle, as he does here. We have studied three whole chapters that teach us how to deal with spiritual gifts in the church in a "decent and orderly" manner. Paul's principle logically relates to any activity that might be considered in the public assembly of a local New Testament church. What happens in the auditorium definitely falls under this filter, but I suggest that what happens in the church lunch room no less should be governed by the same principle. Anything that contributes to a church's "Personality" or reputation needs the conscious and wise restraint that Paul imposes by these words. You can't sit quietly and restrained in the auditorium during the singing, praying, and preaching, and then act like a pagan in the dining room, and honor Paul's teaching.

How are the two words defined that Paul uses in this lesson?

Decently. (Mounce Complete Expository Dictionary) "...in a becoming manner, with propriety, decently, gracefully." Paul directed Titus to speak the things that "...**become sound doctrine.**" (Titus 2:1). Here he directs the Corinthian Church to do all things in a becoming manner. Speaking in deceit or in duplicitous word games, or speaking in any way with guile or with destructive intent of any kind clearly

crosses this godly line of communication and conduct. In any way sowing discord in a church body (Proverbs 6:14, 19; Solomon writes by the direction of the Holy Spirit that God hates sowing discord among brothers) contradicts this decent grace that Paul requires of us. Speaking even the truth of the gospel with malice or with a harsh attitude contradicts “Speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) and therefore fails this teaching.

Order. (Mounce Expository Dictionary) “...order, regular disposition, arrangement; order, series, succession, Lk. 1:8; an order, distinctive class, as of priests, Heb. 5:6, 10; 6,20; 7,112x), 17; order, good order, 1 Cor. 14:40; orderliness, well-regulated conduct, Col. 2:5.” (Complete Word Study Dictionary, “A setting in order.”) This word and context makes a point that sincere, though misguided believers occasionally contradict. They strongly suggest that “Following the Spirit” inherently means random disorganized words, ideas, or events. The preacher who is supposedly following the Spirit may jump all over the Bible and try to connect wholly dissimilar passages and ideas. If you are “Singing in the Spirit,” supposedly each member sings his own tune at his own pace, no one singing in unison or harmony. Paul knows no such idea whatever. In his inspired teaching—inspired and therefore directed by the Holy Spirit—following the Spirit means harmony, organized and cohesive events or teachings. Paul’s directions require the Corinthian Church and us to do all things in a church’s public gathering and activities in a manner described by “...order, arrangement, succession, setting in order.” It is this decent and orderly conduct in a church that epitomizes the presence and power of the Spirit. The Day of Pentecost was not a chaotic episode with everyone talking at once or talking in sounds that no one could understand. The Holy Spirit gave the men who spoke supernatural power to speak clearly, coherently, and in various known human languages that everyone present understood. And Paul requires the Corinthian Church to take charge of her public gatherings so that everything that occurs is done in a decent, orderly, and wholly communicative—edifying—manner.

Our typical public church service consists of at least three activities; 1) congregational hymn singing, 2) one or more persons leading a public prayer, and 3) one or more men preaching the gospel. If we apply Paul’s “decently and in order” requirement to each of these activities, what will they be? In each of the following sections, I do not pretend to define or limit the Holy Spirit or His work. I do offer that the criteria that folks often use to claim the leading of the Holy Spirit is contradictory to Scripture and to the true experience of the Holy

Spirit’s operation. Considering the three following points, I freely confess that I have struggled with almost every deficiency or flaw mentioned, so I use them to help us all, not to overly criticize anyone. If the Holy Spirit inspired and directed the writing of Scripture, we may find in those Scriptures clear explanations and examples of His methods of operation. Without question, He will not specifically define His operation in the Book that He inspired and then contradict His own words in actions with us.

1. **Congregational hymn singing.** One person will lead the hymn, and the folks in the congregation will attentively follow his lead. If the leader and most of the congregation are singing together, and one member decides they are singing the hymn wrongly, so he just sings his way louder than anyone else, decent and orderly collapses into confusion and chaos. Or if each person thinks, “This is one of my favorite hymns. I know the tune, so I don’t need to pay attention to the leader. I’ll just sing it the way I know it should be sung,” you may observe several different people, often eyes closed, singing the hymn their own way, all going at different tempos and pitches. The sound that results from the congregational singing is chaotic. God isn’t praised in worship by chaos! Ephesians 4:3, “*Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,*” makes a powerful and quite clear point. The Holy Spirit always builds unity among the Lord’s people. If discord occurs, it is the result of someone working, consciously “Endeavoring” to disrupt that Holy Spirit unity. The “Spirit filled” hymn singing that glorifies the Lord occurs when the whole congregation strives to sing together, in unison of both voice and heart, to the glory of the Lord.
2. **Public prayer.** Sadly, far too many public prayers seem to be a long string of repeated phrases and words. If you honor true prayer as seeking to approach and talk to the Lord, the Creator of the universe and our Savior, are memorized and repeated thoughts really the appropriate way to engage Him in faith? It is a rare occasion indeed when you hear someone lead public prayer whose words truly sound as if they came from the heart and **sought to speak from the praying person’s heart to the heart of God.** What is prayer, public or private? Is it not true conversation with the Lord? Think about your interactions with other people. How do you react when someone you know expresses one repeated idea after another with no sense of true thoughtfulness or regard for engaging you in a two-way dialogue? Your first reaction may struggle with tedious boredom. Your next reaction may be that this person apparently has very little regard for you to so ignore you and attempt to use you as a

sounding board for old tired phrases and ideas that you've all heard a hundred times already. Then there is the person who always tries to fill his public prayer with quotations of Scripture. As one wise saint once advised a young believer, "Son, don't quote the Book to the One who wrote it." Think about it. Quoting Scripture to the Lord? Such habits, all too common in public prayers, fail the "Decently and in order" mark set by Paul. If you are one of those people asked to speak to God in prayer on behalf of others, especially on behalf of the whole gathered congregation, give earnest prayer to your responsibility before you go to church. Consciously forget every cliché, every memorized word, every repetition of the Lord's name after each short block of words, and any mindless habit you may have picked up in your prayer words. Every time you are asked to lead the church in public prayer, bend your knee and your heart with the full awareness that you have been asked to truly from your heart "Talk to God" on behalf of the whole gathered assembly. Tell Him what is on your mind, what is on the congregation's mind, and tell Him—or ask Him—for what you think you need from Him to manage to work through life's issues in a way that glorifies Him. It may be a lengthy prayer, as when Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple. It may be a one-sentence prayer, "Lord, save me," as when Peter was sinking in the stormy sea. But make doubly sure that you talk to the Lord about what is on your and the congregation's heart. And if you truly seek a reply from the Lord, always prepare for time to hear after you talk to the Lord, even in the public gathering of the church.

3. **Preaching.** The Holy Spirit directed the writing of Scripture. (2 Timothy 3:16) However, He didn't direct that it all be written at one time by one human writer. The preacher, "Bless his heart," who tries to cover "Generations to Resolutions" in one sermon is not following the Spirit nearly as much as he apparently thinks. In the broad content of Scripture, every topic that the believer needs to believe and to use in living a life that glorifies God by putting Him first in life, is covered in a clear systematic manner. If a preacher truly follows the Spirit in his preaching, he will follow the Spirit's model in Scripture by teaching a clear cohesive lesson in simple and edifying words, not by trying to cover the whole Bible and all its topics in one sermon. Follow the example of New Testament writers who quoted Old Testament Scripture. In most cases they cite only a few passages, often just one, and reason from it to their New Testament truth. "Preaching in the Spirit" is not a Scripture-quoting marathon. "Preaching in the Spirit" is also not measured by the volume with which the man speaks, the rapidity of his words, the sense that he is preaching like a "Rapper" in

measured cadence, or by his speaking as if he were singing a song. It is measured by its spiritual content, the simplicity with which people in the audience follow and understand his teaching, and the degree to which his words truly edify them. Some of the wisest counsel a man ever gave me as a young preacher, although it stung my pride, was "Joe, never preach a text so as to leave it on its all-fours." His point was painfully obvious. Let Scripture stand out in your preaching in simple, clear, and unmistakable ways so that its message, the message the Holy Spirit intended by it, is clearly and simply understood by the people who hear. "I didn't understand what the preacher said, but that sure was a deep sermon" is a rebuke to sound, true "Holy Spirit" empowered preaching. A wise, humble, and studious believer may be able to teach an instructive Bible lesson, but no man can preach the gospel by himself or in his own power. The Holy Spirit requires a man to get himself out of the way and out of the spotlight. "***We preach not ourselves***" is a Biblical description of real preaching.

Doing things decently and in order as Paul teaches in this lesson is not optional for a faithful church. It is a Biblical mandate.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor