

**“Good Worship”**  
**1 Corinthians 14:20-33**  
**October 22, 2006**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Paul is quite clear about the kind of corporate worship he wanted to see in Corinth and throughout the Church. He desired that there be such a sense of God’s presence that even outsiders and unbelievers would be powerfully affected by it. **“He is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you”** (v. 24-25). That had not been the case in Corinth. They had co-opted the worship services for another, more self-centered purpose. They had become so enamored of the spectacle of the gift of tongues that they would gather for worship and all speak in tongues at the same time. To them, worship was all about having an experience that made them feel good about themselves, and speaking in tongues made them feel good. In doing so, the Corinthians had co-opted the worship service from its intended purpose to another purpose.

**Illustration:** Several years ago, when we were living in Maryland, the women of our church were all invited to a retreat being run by a larger organization. I still remember being struck by the brochure they received. It went into great detail describing the nice retreat facilities, followed by a detailed menu for every single meal they would be eating. Then, at the end of the brochure, in small print, it listed the topic and speaker for the weekend. Just as happened with the Corinthian worship services, the higher and more important purpose had been co-opted by something lesser.

**Illustration #2:** Several years ago, I read about a café in Tel Aviv that decided that people came to restaurants for the atmosphere more than the food. So they created a restaurant that focused on atmosphere and got rid of the food. Everything was just like a real restaurant except that no food ever came to your table. Menus were passed out, waiters took orders, but no one ever ate. Worship that misses the mark of God’s glorious and transforming presence is about as foolish as that.

Though the issue expands beyond tongues-speaking, worship is often co-opted today just like it was in Corinth. When its purpose becomes entertainment or experiencing a good feeling, we have lost the real reason for worship. How is it that we can have the kind of worship Paul describes, in which there is a clear sense of God’s presence, leading to such a deep response that the worshiper falls on his face before God? This kind of worship comes when at least three qualities are in place.

**I. Unity Among God’s People**

As becomes obvious even after a casual reading of 1 Corinthians, this church had a significant problem with disunity. They had developed competitive loyalties to different teachers that became like the Auburn-Alabama rivalry. That is, it's not enough to talk about how good your teacher is—you also have to run down the other teacher. This disunity displayed itself in a number of ways, many of them touching upon worship. For example, the early church would usually share a meal when they came together for worship and the Lord's Supper. They would come together for these meals, and each family would be expected to bring its own food. The Corinthian church had members from both the upper and lower classes. The poor would frequently not have any food, but would come anyway. In Corinth, the rich would sit and eat the food they had brought and share none of it with the poor. So the poor would come hungry and leave even more hungry, while the rich would be well-fed and would sometimes drink enough wine to get drunk.

The problem addressed in chapter 14 stemmed from the way they practiced tongues-speaking. Their worship services were not at all the calm, orderly affairs we're used to here. They must have been more like a three-ring circus, with many different people speaking in tongues all at the same time. Paul writes to them about this, seeking to put some curbs on the use of tongues-speaking, while stopping short of outright condemnation. He also recommends the greater use of the gift of prophecy. Now these gifts of tongues and prophecy are uncharted waters for most Presbyterians, so we need to take just a few minutes to clarify what is involved with these gifts.

The gift of tongues was the same gift that is seen in Acts 2, where the disciples are given the ability to speak in a foreign language which they have never learned and which they themselves cannot understand, even as they speak. It doesn't seem to be a heavenly, unknown language, but rather a known, human language. There has been a great deal of discussion about whether or not this gift continues into our day. Those arguing against its continuation, as do many Presbyterians, rely heavily on Ephesians 2:20. In that verse, the church is said to be **“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”** The argument would be that the gift of tongues is part of this foundational element, and thus no longer valid. I must say that I don't find that argument persuasive. For one thing, it doesn't specifically include the gift of tongues in that list of foundational roles. In any case, Paul is quite clear in our chapter that the gift of tongues was not to be exercised in the corporate worship as the Corinthians were doing it. He limited it extensively, allowing for only two or three, and requiring in every case that someone should interpret what was said.

Paul was much more accepting of the gift of prophecy. But what exactly is meant by prophecy? There seemed to be two ways this word was used. There was first of all a specific office of prophet, and then a more general sense of prophecy that was closer to what we call preaching. I think it is this second, more general sense, that is meant in this passage. So when someone would prophesy in this general sense, they would simply stand and speak about significant matters God

had put on their heart. Paul commended this prophetic gift in the worship service of the church, because it was understandable and beneficial to all.

But now let's return to our main point, which is not centrally related to tongues. People get lost in this passage in the attempt to understand tongues-speaking, and that's not really the main point Paul is making. The problem he's addressing is disunity that had arisen because the Corinthians had forgotten the gospel. Tongues-speaking was only the presenting issue for that. The Corinthians were boasting in tongues-speaking, and boasting in anything other than Jesus Christ always leads to disunity. One of the ways Paul speaks about embracing the gospel is to use the term boasting. To believe the gospel is to boast in Jesus alone. God chooses the weak so that no one "might boast in the presence of God" (1:29). Paul said in another place, "**Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ**" (Gal. 6:14). The Corinthians had forgotten the gospel and were boasting in spectacular gifts like tongues-speaking or in having the best leader. Such boasting is a primary cause of disunity in the church. Disunity springs not primarily from personality differences, but from forgetting the gospel. Or to say it more positively, unity springs from remembering and believing the gospel. When we believe the gospel and look to Jesus for all things, we unite in boasting in Jesus. As Paul says earlier, Jesus has become "**our righteousness and sanctification and redemption**" (1:30). To believe in Jesus is to stop boasting in all else, and therefore to experience true unity.

This problem of boasting outside of Jesus, of course, remains a source of disunity today. One group boasts in having the correct theology, while another claims to be the truly spiritual group because they alone understand the secret to true spirituality, and still another boasts in being the only ones to have righteous behavior. Such disunity prevents the kind of worship Paul describes here, in which a deep sense of God's presence becomes so pervasive that people experience deep conviction of sin.

**Illustration:** Every pastor has either heard or experienced first-hand many stories about the kind of disunity that can develop in a church as a result of forgetting the gospel. This church has some significant disunity in its past. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, our church had been part of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. There was an attempt to bring into union the Cumberland church and the northern Presbyterian church. The attempt divided many churches, including our own. The Session of our church was part of the union group, but the majority of the congregation were anti-unionists. The hostility between these two groups became such that they began to hold separate worship services in the same building. Not content with that, the anti-unionists felt so strongly that they would turn the pews around and face the opposite direction while they worshipped. Predictably, this disunity eventually expressed itself in a complete separation, which is when our church (the pro-union group) moved to our present location.

**Application:** Let's pause for an important application. Good worship is not just a product of good preaching and good music. Good relationships that

result from believing the gospel are also essential. That's one of the reasons we've added this greeting time to our worship services. Now good relationships are going to take more than three minutes during a worship service. They take believing the gospel, and they take intentionality. Let me encourage you to take some step toward being more intentional in cultivating good relationships here. Invite someone over for lunch today after church. Get involved in a small group, utilizing one of our men's or women's small groups or one of the ones listed in the bulletin. Take some step to create space for people in your life.

## II. Confidence in the Preached Word

Throughout this passage, Paul encourages the use of prophecy over tongues-speaking in the worship of the church. He says, **“In church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue”** (v. 19). Remember that prophecy here is very close to the preached word. So Paul is seeking to elevate the preached word over more spectacular things like the gift of tongues. Paul was criticized by many in Corinth for the plainness of his preaching and teaching style. He didn't meet the standards of eloquent rhetoric the Corinthians were used to in their teachers. Paul's response wasn't to study hard and learn those rhetorical devices. He was content not to come to them with **“lofty speech or wisdom.”** Instead, he simply proclaimed **“Jesus Christ and him crucified”** (2:1-2).

Good worship, then, is characterized by the simplicity of the preached word of God. One of the implications of this is to refuse to clamor for the sensational or the sentimental in our worship services. When we lose our confidence in the preached word of God, we begin to put our confidence elsewhere, and usually it's either in the sensational or the sentimental. Seeking the sensational could be as simple as a pastor who tells too many stories, or feels he has to keep people laughing all the time. Or it can be more overt, with pastors doing things like riding motorcycles down the middle aisle of the church. I once heard of a church that had the pastor dress up as a clown while leading his church in worship. This is why I don't use movie clips in my preaching. While I wouldn't condemn this practice by other pastors, I know how easy it is to begin relying on such sensational things in such a way that we lose our confidence in God speaking to us through the simplicity of his Word preached to us.

Sentimentality is another danger when we lose our confidence in God's word. Sentimentalism is the effort to go directly to one's emotions in order to elicit some response that is unrelated to the mind. God has given us emotions, and we ought not to be afraid of expressing them. But when we attempt to bypass the understanding and simply try to get people to have an emotional response, we are guilty of sentimentality. Since music has a unique capacity for touching us emotionally, sentimentalism is often expressed in the musical decisions of worship. It might rely on too much repetition, for example, until people respond emotionally. The improper use of stories by the preacher can also become a

problem here. Stories are a powerful tool, but if they are selected and delivered only for their capacity to elicit an emotional response, we have gone too far.

### **III. A Sense of God's Transcendence**

The transcendence of God means that he is far above us as a holy God. Notice how verse 25 speaks of that. As a result of God's transcendence, the secrets of the heart are disclosed, leading the worshiper to fall on his face before such a God. In our worship, there ought to be a sense that God is here, and as a result we ought not to be overly casual about him. I was once in a worship service when someone sitting right near the front had his cell phone ring. Of course, cell phones ringing in church is not an unusual event. People sometimes forget to silence their phones, and in such cases when they ring, most simply reach down and silence them after only a couple of rings. But this particular person answered his phone and began a conversation with the person on the other end in a voice loud enough to be understood by half the congregation. He had no sense of the transcendence of God if he believed that the worship of God could be interrupted by a phone call.

In a practical way, this sense of God's transcendence is hurt by an overly casual or informal approach to God. If you were invited to dine with the President of the United States, it would feel very normal to take a step away from informality. How much more so with the God of the universe! On the positive side, a sense of God's transcendence is aided by the pursuit of excellence in our worship. For example, in our music ministry, we give to God our best. Our philosophy here at Altadena, under Steve's superb leadership, is to avoid using professional musicians, simply because we don't want to turn our worship service into a performance. But Steve seeks to call out the best that God has given to us as a church. Such a focus helps promote this sense of God's transcendence.

### **CONCLUSION:**

How can we have both of these last two features: having confidence in the simplicity of God's word at the same time that we have a sense of God's transcendence? If a little formality is called for as an expression of God's transcendence, how do we keep that from becoming a deadening formalism in which we take ourselves too seriously? As in all things, the gospel is the answer. In the gospel, we see the greatness of our sin that gives us this sense of God's transcendence. But we also embrace the joy of sins forgiven in the gospel, a joy that puts a smile on the face at the same time that we may feel like falling on our face because of our sin. I like the way Tim Keller says this in an article he wrote on worship. "Only a joyful yet awe-filled heart—an exuberant decorum—can keep pomp and sentimentality from mimicking the two true poles of biblical worship: awe and intimacy" (in *Worship By the Book*, by Carson, p. 214). May God be pleased to make us hungry for this exuberant decorum, and may he give it to us by his great mercy!