

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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THE EARLY CHURCH'S WORSHIP PROBLEMS

In our zeal to emulate and apply the principles of the early church in our churches today, we are prone to overlook some of the problems they faced. Early in the book of Acts we are introduced to the power and glory of the life of the early church, but it isn't long before we are confronted with serious problems arising. These problems become more evident in the epistles, especially problems in the Corinthian church. This article addresses only the problems arising in the worship of the early church, noting the passages that speak of the church "gathered together", that is, problems arising in their services of worship.

THE PROBLEM OF THE LORD'S SUPPER. One of the priorities of worship in the early church was the Lord's Supper. In Acts 20:7 we read: "And on the first day of the week, when we gathered together to break bread, Paul preached unto them." In dealing with the problem of abuse of the Lord's Supper in First Corinthians the term "when you come together" is used five times (11; 17, 18, 20, 33, 34), showing they "came together" to eat the Lord's Supper (ver. 20), however there was a problem with their "coming together" stated in these words: "when you come together as a church, I hear there are divisions among you...therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper for in Your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk" (ver. 18, 20, 21). In the way we serve the Lord's Supper today it would be unrealistic and strange for one to be "hungry and drunk" at this service. We can understand why Paul said "when you come together it is not to eat the Lord's Supper." However we can understand how and why this problem developed when we know more about the early church's practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper.

There are two passages of Scripture that shed light on the problem in Corinth. In warning the church of false teachers, Jude pronounced moral indignation upon false teachers that had "crept in unnoticed" who were "hidden reefs in your love feasts, when they feast with you without fear" (Jude 1: 12). In II Peter 2:13 these teachers are called "spots and blemishes while they feast with you" (KJV). The NASV translates "feasts" as "deceptions" and in the margin states "some ancient manuscripts read love feasts" while the RSV translates it "dissipation" with a marginal note "love feasts" and the Living Bible: "love feasts" and the NIV also translates it "feasts" with a marginal note showing some manuscripts reading "love feasts". Evidently the love feasts were meals of fellowship, held on the Lord's day. It was a meal to which everyone brought what they could, and at which all shared and shared alike. Acts 2:46 states: "And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart". It was at these meals, later called "love feasts" that they observed the Lord's Supper. This helps us understand the problem Paul is dealing with in I Corinthians 11:17-34, and how one could be "hungry and another drunk". In the writings of the "church fathers" (men that lived and wrote after the death of the Apostles) there are many accounts of the love feasts and the practice of the Lord's Supper.

David Bercot in *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* gives the following account from the writings of Justin Martyr (100-165 A D) of how the Lord's Supper was observed during this time: "Having ended the prayers, we greet one another with a kiss. Then there is brought to the president bread and a cup of wine mixed with water. Then the president offers prayers and thanksgiving, according to his ability. And the people assent, saying 'Amen' then the elements are distributed to everyone, and everyone participates. And a portion of it is sent by the deacons to those who are absent." *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* states: "By the middle of the second century, the love feast for fellowship and charity had been definitely separated from association with the rite of the Lord's Supper."

THE PROBLEM OF THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH. I Corinthians 14:34-45: "Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves just as the Law also says. And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church". This passage has been interpreted in various ways and has been the source of much speculation and debate among Bible scholars.

The New Testament, excluding the role of women in the ministry of Christ, refers many times to women's role in the church. To note a few we begin with the prophesy of Joel quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost: "...And your sons and daughters shall prophesy...even upon My bond slaves both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17, 18). Philip, one of the seven chosen to serve tables, "had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses" (Acts 21:9). In Romans 16:1 Phoebe is said to be a deacon (the word is masculine, but is translated "deaconess") in the church at Cenchrea. In verse 3 Paul lists Priscilla and Aquila as his "fellow-workers in Christ." (When Paul first met them, Aquila was mentioned first then his wife Priscilla (Acts 18:2) but afterwards Priscilla is generally mentioned before her husband (Acts 18:18, 26; Rom. 16:3; II Tim. 4:19). In I Corinthians 16:19 he mentions Aquila first and refers to "the church which is in their house"). In verse 7 of Romans 16 Paul greets Andronicus and Junia (feminine) who is said to be "outstanding among the Apostles". Philippians 4:2 Paul states, "I urge Euodia and Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord...I ask you also to help these women who shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel..." The negative side of this is seen in that the church in Thyatira was condemned because they tolerated "the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and teaches and leads my bond-servants astray..." (Rev. 2:20). I Corinthians 11:5 Paul refers to women "praying or prophesying". The context is women were praying and prophesying with their heads uncovered (ver. 5, 13). An uncovered head of the woman was evidently a sign of prostitution. Even though they had to be corrected, this passage shows that women along with men (ver. 4) did pray and prophesy in the church. The question is: was Paul contradicting himself when he wrote chapter 14:34? These instructions must be seen in the context in which Paul is speaking. The context of chapter 11 is respect for authority in prayer when the church met together for the Lord's Supper.

Chapter 14 is in the context of speaking in tongues and prophesying in the assembly.

Two words used here should be examined: “silent” and “speak”. There are four different words translated “silent” in the New Testament. The word used in I Cor. 14:34 (*sigao*) “let the women keep silent in the church” is used in verses 28 and 30 in reference to speaking in tongues and prophesying. It is used in Luke 9:36 after his transfiguration the disciples “kept *silent* and reported to no one the things they had seen,” and in Luke 20:26 when Jesus hushed the Jewish leaders trying to trap him with the Roman coin: they “became *silent*.” The word is used in Acts 12:17 when the people were amazed at Peter being released from prison, he “motioning to them with his hand to be *silent*...” and in Acts 15:12: “and all the multitude kept *silent* and were listening to Barnabas and Saul.” All these scriptures seem to indicate a voluntary silence. Paul is dealing with disorder in the church when there was prophesying and speaking in tongues. Verse 34 follows a verse dealing with prophesying which was not “one by one” (ver.31) resulting in confusion. Verse 35 indicates that in this confusion the women were not learning anything, so they were to “ask their own husbands at home, for it is improper for a woman to speak (ask questions about the prophecies) in church.”

There are several words that can be translated “speak” from the Greek word *laleo*. Some examples: preach, proclaim, say, teach, state, tell, utter, talk. In reference to verses 34 and 35 W.E. Vine in *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* states: “some regard this as an injunction against chattering, a meaning which is absent from the use of the verb everywhere else in the New Testament.” *Young’s Lexicon To The New Testament* shows the word used in verses 34 and 35 is used 298 times in the New Testament. To explain these verses we must note they are written in the context of speaking in tongues and prophesying when the church is assembled together (ver. 23-40). Paul is concerned that “all things be done for edification” (ver. 26) and there be no “confusion” (ver. 33) in the meetings, rather “all things be done properly and in an orderly manner” (ver. 40). The fact that the women were to “ask their husbands at home” (ver. 35) indicates his admonition is to married women. Perhaps their husbands were prophesying and Paul is telling them if they did not understand they were to ask their husbands, not in the assembly, but at home. He is not saying that a woman had no right to pray or prophesy in the church, because he had already given instructions as to how and under what conditions she was to do it (11:5) He makes the point that they are to “subject themselves as also the Law says.”

I Timothy 2:11-14: “Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow women to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression”. This instruction is not based on current practices in Ephesus, but is concerning the authority established by God in the beginning when man sinned (Genesis 3:6, 13). He has explained this in I Corinthians 11:1-12. The word used here for “silence” is not the same word as he used in I Corinthians 11:1-12. It is the word *hasuchia* which ‘indicates tranquility arising from within, causing no disturbance to others’ (Vine). Kittel in *A Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* shows this word

has the “sense of renunciation of initiative.” The difference in these two words is seen in Acts 21:40 and 22:1-2. In Paul’s defense before angry Jews when he “motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great silence, (*sigao*, the same word used in I Cor. 14:34) he spoke...” In Acts 22:2 “And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more silent (*asuchia*), the word used in I Tim 2:11. The difference is being silent (*sigao*) in order to hear someone speak and being silent (*asuchia*) to listen with serious attention. Paul then makes it plain he did “not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain silent” (ver. 12). His reasoning is based upon Genesis 3:6, 13. In this passage it is a matter of recognizing authority given to man and not to woman.

THE PROBLEM OF SPEAKING IN TONGUES. The church in Corinth was “enriched in all speech and knowledge” and were not lacking in any gift” (1:5, 7), but they were replete with problems concerning their gifts, one of which was the speaking in tongues. Edward Schweizer in *The Service of Worship* summarizes the situation in Corinth in these words: “In Corinth a conception of the Spirit of God was predominant which mixed up the Holy Spirit with enthusiasm. To the Corinthians an utterance seemed to be the more godly the more miraculous it appeared. Thus tongues were the highest degree of spiritual maturity, just because it showed it depended on a spiritual power which could not be identified with the natural faculty of man.” Although spiritual gifts are discussed in Romans 12:3-8 and Ephesians 4:7-11, First Corinthians is the only book that mentions the gift of tongues. In these chapters Paul is dealing with the abuse and misuse of the gift of tongues.

The real gift of tongues as revealed in the book of Acts was real languages, not some meaningless speech. The unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem “were bewildered because they were each one hearing them speak in his own language” (2:6). There are sixteen different countries whose language was being spoken. The word used in Corinthians for tongues is the same word used in Acts for tongues. It is reasonable to conclude that in the case of the Corinthians the real gift was languages. Paul insists there be interpretation (I Cor. 14:13, 27). The word for “interpretation” is the same word as “translation” in John 9:7 and Hebrews 7:2. This was necessary because “Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying” (14:5). The KJV in some places shows the word as “unknown tongue” with “unknown” in italics and in other verses simply uses the word “tongue”. The italics showing the word unknown is not in the original language. John MacArthur, Jr. in his book *Charismatic Chaos* shows that “tongues always appear in the plural form in Acts, indicating multiple languages. In First Corinthians 14, however, Paul employed both the singular and plural forms. One explanation is that when he used the singular ‘tongue’, he was referring to the counterfeit pagan babbling that some Corinthian believers were evidently using instead of the true gift of languages. Meaningless, ecstatic speech was fundamentally all the same, so the plural form was unnecessary. When Paul was clearly referring to the authentic gift of languages he used the plural ‘tongues’”. Perhaps the King James translators were correct when they supply the word “unknown” showing the difference in real language and mere gibberish.