

1 Corinthians 14—God’s Prescription for Order in the Church

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. Rev. John Pringle (The Calvin Translation Society, 1843), Vol. I, 466-474, emphasis added, English updated.

1 Corinthians 14:33-40

14:33 “For God is not *the author* of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.”

For God is not of confusion. We must understand the word Author, or some term of that kind. Here we have a most valuable statement, by which we are taught, that we do not serve God unless in the event of our being lovers of *peace*, and eager to promote it. Whenever, therefore, there is a disposition to quarrel, *there*, it is certain, God does not reign. And how easy it is to say this! How very *generally* all have it in their mouths! Yet, in the meantime, the majority of persons fly into a rage about nothing, or *they* trouble the Church, from a desire that *they* may, by some means, rise into view, and may *seem to be someone* (Galatians 2:6).

Let us, therefore, bear in mind, that, in judging as to the servants of Christ, this mark must be kept in view — whether or not they aim at *peace* and concord, and, by conducting themselves peaceably, avoid contentions to the utmost of their power, provided, however, we understand by this a *peace* of which the truth of God is the bond. For if we are called to contend against wicked doctrines, even though heaven and earth should come together, we must, nevertheless, persevere in the contest. We must, indeed, in the first place, make it our aim, that the truth of God may, without contention, maintain its ground; but if the wicked resist, we must set our face against them, and have no fear, lest the blame of the disturbances should be laid to our charge. For accursed is that *peace* of which revolt from God is the bond, and blessed are those contentions by which it is *necessary* to maintain the kingdom of Christ.

As in all the Churches of the saints. The comparison does not refer merely to what was said immediately before, but to the whole of the foregoing representation. “I have up until now enjoined on you nothing that is not observed in *all the Churches*, and, in this manner, they are maintained in *peace*. *Let* it be your care, therefore, to borrow, what other Churches have found by experience to be salutary [for their good], and most profitable for maintaining *peace*.” His explicit mention of the term *saints* is emphatic — as if with the view of exempting rightly constituted Churches from a mark of disgrace.

It appears that the Church of the Corinthians was infected with this fault too, that the talkativeness of women was allowed a place in the sacred assembly, or rather that the fullest liberty was given to it. Hence he forbids them to speak in public, either for the purpose of teaching or of prophesying. This, however, we must understand as referring to ordinary service, or where there is a Church in a regularly constituted state; for a necessity may occur of such a nature as to require that a woman should speak in public; but Paul has merely in view what is becoming in a duly [properly] regulated assembly.

34 “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but *they are* to be submissive, as the law also says.”

Let them be in subjection, as also saith the law. What connection has the object that he has in view with the subjection under which the law places women? “For what is there,” someone will say, “to hinder their being in subjection, and yet at the same time teaching?”

I answer, that the office of teaching is a superiority in the Church, and is, consequently, inconsistent with *subjection*. For how unseemly [inappropriate] a thing it were, that one who is under subjection to one of the members, should preside over the entire body! It is therefore an argument from things inconsistent — If the woman is under subjection, she is, consequently, prohibited from authority to teach in public.

And unquestionably, wherever even natural propriety has been maintained, women have in all ages been excluded from the public management of affairs. It is the dictate of common sense, that female government is improper and unseemly. Nay more, while originally they had permission given to them at Rome to plead before a court, the effrontery of Caia Afrania led to their being interdicted [prohibited], even from this. Paul’s reasoning, however, is simple — that authority to teach is not suitable to the station that a woman occupies, because, if she teaches, she presides over all the men, while it becomes her to be *under subjection*.

35 “And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.”

If they wish to learn anything. That he may not seem, by this means, to shut out women from opportunities of learning, he desires them, if they are in doubt as to anything, to inquire in private, that they may not stir up any disputation in public. When he says, *husbands*, he does not prohibit them from consulting the Prophets themselves, if necessary. For all husbands are not competent to give an answer in such a case; but, as he is reasoning here as to external polity [organization], he reckons it sufficient to point out what is unseemly [improper], that the Corinthians may guard against it. In the meantime, it is the part of the prudent reader to consider, that the things of which he here treats are intermediate and indifferent, in which there is nothing unlawful, but what is at variance with propriety and edification.

36 “Or did the word of God come *originally* from you? Or *was it* you only that it reached?”

Did the word of God come out from you? This is a somewhat sharper reproof, but nothing more than was needful for beating down the haughtiness of the Corinthians. They were, beyond measure, self-complacent. They could not endure that either themselves, or what belonged to them, should be found fault with in anything. He asks, accordingly, whether they are the only Christians in the world; nay, farther, whether they are the first, or are to be the last? “*Did the word of God,*” says he, “*come out from you?*” that is, “*Did it originate with you?*” “*Has it ended with you?*” that is, “*Will it spread no farther?*” The design of the admonition is this — that they may not, without having any regard to others, please themselves in their own contrivances or customs.

And this is a doctrine of general application; for no Church should be taken up with itself exclusively, to the neglect of others; but on the contrary, they ought all, in their turn, to hold out the right hand to each other, in the way of cherishing mutual fellowship, and accommodating themselves to each other, insofar as a regard to harmony requires.

But here it is asked, whether every Church, according as it has had the precedence of another in the order of time, has it also in its power to bind it to observe its institutions. For Paul seems to imply this in what he says. For example, Jerusalem was the mother of all the Churches, inasmuch as *the word of the Lord had come out from it*. Was she then at liberty to assume to herself a superior right, so as to bind all others to follow her? I answer, that Paul here does not employ an argument of universal application, but one that was specially applicable to the Corinthians, as is frequently the case. He had, therefore, an eye to individuals, rather than to the thing itself.

Hence it does not necessarily follow, that Churches that are of later origin must be bound to observe, in every point, the institutions of the earlier ones, inasmuch as even Paul himself did not bind himself by this rule, so as to obtrude upon other Churches the customs that were in use at Jerusalem.

Let there be nothing of ambition — let there be nothing of obstinacy — let there be nothing of pride and contempt for other Churches — let there be, on the other hand, a desire to edify — let there be moderation and prudence; and in that case, amidst a diversity of observances, there will be nothing that is worthy of reproof.

Let us, therefore, bear in mind, that the haughtiness of the Corinthians is here reprov'd, who, concerned for themselves exclusively, showed no respect to the Churches of earlier origin, from which they had received the gospel, and did not endeavor to accommodate themselves to other Churches, to which the gospel had flowed out from them. Would to God that there were no Corinth in our times, in respect of this fault, as well as of others! But we see how savage men, who have *never tasted* the gospel (Hebrews 6:5) trouble the Churches of the saints by a tyrannical enforcement of their own laws.

37 “If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.”

If anyone thinks himself. Mark here the judgment, which he had previously assigned to the Prophets — that they should receive what they recognized as being from God. He does not, however, desire them to inquire as to his doctrine, as though it were a doubtful matter, but to receive it as the sure word of God, inasmuch as they will recognize it as the word of God, if they judge rightly. Farther, it is in virtue of apostolical authority, that he takes it upon himself to prescribe to them the sentence which they ought to pronounce.

There is still greater confidence in what he immediately adds — He *that is ignorant, let him be ignorant*. This, it is true, was allowable for Paul, who was fully assured as to the revelation that he had received from God, and he ought also to have been well known to the Corinthians, so that they should have looked upon him in no other light, than as an Apostle of the Lord. It is not, however, for every one to advance such a claim for himself, or if he does, he will, by his boasting, throw himself open to merited derision, for *then* only is there ground for such confidence, when what is affirmed with the mouth shows itself in reality.

It was with truth that Paul affirmed, that his precepts were those of the Lord. Many will be prepared to pretend the same thing on false grounds. His great object is this — that it may be clearly perceived, that he who does not allow himself to be under control, speaks as from the Holy Spirit, not from his own brain. That man, therefore, who is no other than a pure organ of the Holy Spirit, will have the courage to declare fearlessly with

Paul, that those who shall reject his doctrine, are not *Prophets* or *spiritual* persons; and this he will do in virtue of a right that belongs to him, in accordance with what we had in the beginning of the Epistle — he *that is spiritual, judgeth all things* (1 Corinthians 2:15).

But it may be asked here, how it is that Paul declares those things to be *commandments of the Lord*, as to which no statement is to be found in the Scriptures? Besides this, there is also another difficulty that presents itself — that if they are the *commandments of the Lord*, they are necessary to be observed, and they bind the conscience, and yet they are rites connected with polity [government], as to the observance of which no such necessity exists. Paul, however, merely says, that he enjoins nothing, but what is in accordance with the will of God. Now God endowed him with wisdom, that he might recommend this order in external things at Corinth, and in other places — not that it might be an inviolable law, like those that relate to the spiritual worship of God, but that it might be a useful directory to all the sons of God, and not by any means to be despised.

38-40 “But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant. Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order.”

But if any man be ignorant. The old translation reads thus: *He that knows not this, will be unknown*; but this is a mistake. For Paul had it in view to cut off every handle from contentious persons, who make no end of disputing, and that, under the pretense of inquiring — as if the matter were not yet clear; or at least he intimates [implies] in general terms, that he regarded as of no account any one that would call in question what he said. “If any one is ignorant, I do not stop to take notice of his doubts, for the certainty of my doctrine is not at all impaired by this. Let him go then, whoever he may be. As for you, do not the less on that account give credit to Christ, as speaking by me.” In short, he intimates, that sceptics, contentious persons, and subtle disputants; do not by the questions they raise diminish, in any degree, the authority of sound doctrine, and of that truth as to which believers ought to feel assured, and at the same time he admonishes us, not to allow their doubts to be any hindrance in our way.

That elevation of mind, however, which despises all human judgments, ought to be founded on ascertained truth. Hence, as it would be the part of perverse rashness, either to maintain pertinaciously, in opposition to the views of all others, an opinion that has once been taken up, or audaciously to cling to it, while others are in doubt, so, on the other hand, when we have felt assured that it is God that speaks, let us fearlessly break through all human impediments and all difficulties.

39. Wherefore, brethren. This is the conclusion in connection with the principal question — that *prophecy* is to be preferred to other gifts, because it is the most useful gift of all, while at the same time other gifts ought not to be despised. We must observe, however, his manner of speaking. For he intimates, that *prophecy* is worthy of being eagerly and ardently aspired at by all. In the meantime, he exhorts them not to envy others the rarer gift, which is not so much to be desired; nay more, to allow them the praise that is due to them, divesting themselves of all envy.

40. All things decently and in order. Here we have a more general conclusion, which does not merely include, in short compass, the entire case, but also the different parts. Nay

farther, it is a rule by which we must regulate everything, that has to do with external polity. As he had discoursed, in various instances, as to rites, he wished to sum up everything here in a brief summary — that decorum should be observed — that confusion should be avoided.

This statement shows, that he did not wish to bind consciences by the foregoing precepts, as if they were in themselves necessary, but only insofar as they were subservient to propriety and peace. Hence we gather (as I have said) a doctrine that is always in force, as to the purpose to which the polity of the Church ought to be directed. The Lord has left external rites in our choice with this view — that we may not think that His worship consists wholly in these things. In the meantime, He has not allowed us a rambling and unbridled liberty, but has enclosed it (so to speak) with railings [restraints], or at least has laid a restriction upon the liberty granted by Him in such a manner, that it is after all only from his word that we can judge as to what is right. This passage, therefore, when duly [properly] considered, will show the difference between the tyrannical edicts of the Pope, which oppress men's consciences with a dreadful bondage, and the godly regulations of the Church, by which discipline and order are maintained. Nay farther, we may readily infer from this, that the latter are not to be looked upon as human traditions, inasmuch as they are founded upon this general injunction, and have a manifest approval, as it were, from the mouth of Christ Himself.