

Now we come to what is to be a common practice when the assembly is assembled, **prophesying**. Paul has used much of the first part of this chapter to contrast the universal benefit of prophesying with the very limited value of tongues in assembly. He has restricted the use of tongues to two or at the most three and only when there is an interpreter. He seems to discourage the tongue speakers themselves from interpreting their own statements although he says in verse 13 “Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret.” He seems to favor team work, the speaker relying upon another to interpret. Why? To speak in a foreign language where no one else understands it and then translate what he just said is ostentatious (showing off), and really tacky, even if others are so fleshly as to find such things entertaining. He also had to restrict speaking in tongues to one at a time! Since no one could understand what was being said it apparently didn’t matter to them if several were speaking at once. What confusion! What a dishonor to the Lord Jesus Christ and His name. No wonder visitors would think them to have gone mad (v. 23).

Paul now lays out orderly prophesying. He limits it also to two or three. Even though he doesn’t say outright “at the most three” it seems obvious he means that, having just said it about tongues. Since it isn’t specifically prohibited, some have argued to allow prophesying by more than three speakers in one meeting. But the New Testament isn’t a legal document where everything has to be spelled out or exceptions and loopholes can be sought (and usually found) at the expense of the intent. The Law of Moses was constructed more like a legal document. It seemed to invite the lawyers to find loop holes and develop whole sets of additional rules to plug them. This was the state of the Jews in the Lord’s day. The Sadducees kept finding “loop holes” and the Pharisees kept trying to plug them. The Lord had to rebuke them for adding to the Law, and for self righteous attitudes. We need to be cautious about making rules that add to the order set forth in the New Testament, especially by Paul. We also need to beware of discounting the order set out here as “out of date,” “unworkable nowadays,” and “culturally unsuitable,” or replaced by traditions developed since the Bible was written. While the language here is not legal, and is couched in voluntary terms such as “let”, they are binding and to be respected and obeyed.

John 14:15 If ye love me, keep my commandments

1John 5:3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.

They are indeed the way of liberty, peace, unity and blessing.

Paul also enjoins respect for others who may have a Spirit led message. Those who are speaking are not to

monopolize the time available. Those who feel they have a pressing message from the Lord are to patiently wait for the other to finish, even if he feels what is being given is not Spirit led or edifying. The spirits of the prophets are to be subject to the prophets. Each is to be in complete control of himself and yet yielded to the leading of the Spirit whether to speak, when to speak, how long to speak and what to say. Each is to listen attentively. If he has a message it shouldn’t normally repeat what has already been said, but often will build on it. Sometimes one may speak to reemphasize what has been said, or to temper what has been said. Other times the Spirit may lead to seeming unrelated messages from the two or three that speak. On the other hand one may be led to correct or even rebuke something already said but that should be extremely rare, reserved for flagrant, blasphemous statements, certainly not mere differences of opinion.

Am I setting down rules here? Please don’t take the remarks as that. We may make observations that help interpret scripture but they are subject to the basic order laid out in scripture. The reader is privileged and responsible to weigh anything I write and to seek clarification and challenge me to back up what I say with scripture. The same is true for those sitting in meeting. We are to be listening, not to note mistakes, but to weigh what is being said, seeking out personal edification, heart searching, encouragement, comfort, and blessing. “Let the rest judge.” Not simply the rest of the prophets, as being a special class, but all present. Perhaps not every thing said seems to apply to me, or even to the current state of the assembly as I view it. Others present may be the Spirit’s direct target in these cases. However let’s not sit there and think “I hope _____ is listening, he/she sure needs that!”. Maybe he does and we can genuinely pray in the Spirit for his or her blessing, but let’s beware of pride because “I don’t have that problem,” or “I know better than that.” Been there. Done that. We indeed should take heed if just to avoid something we haven’t fallen into yet.

All the listeners, “the rest,” are to judge what is being said. We are to weigh what is said!. Separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak.

1Thessalonians 5:19 quench not the Spirit; 20 do not lightly esteem prophecies; 21 but prove all things, hold fast the right; 22 hold aloof from every form of wickedness. (JND)

We learn from these statements that the prophets are not to be considered inspired and infallible. (All who claim to be Apostles or infallible today are unscriptural, are deceivers, even if self deceived, and not to be accepted.) Believers have the duty to weigh whatever is said against scripture. Not that every thing said that appears at first to be unscriptural, or that differs with what I believe, is to be rejected. We must always be humble enough to at least entertain the possibility that “I might be wrong.” On the

other hand we are not to be gullible and receive whatever is said because it was **said in meeting**, or it was **said by so and so**. Nor are we to automatically not listen to so and so “because he doesn’t present what he has to say clearly,” or “because he never has anything good,” etc. We respect him and support him in prayer while he is speaking because he is a brother in Christ. He is speaking on behalf of God in the presence of the Lord in the midst at the direction of the Holy Spirit. We may and must prayerfully, faithfully, lovingly test what is said against scripture, but we must never simply disregard someone who is a brother in Christ speaking in the assembly gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. If he is out of order, wasting our time, or worse, then shame upon him and us that the assembly is in such a low spiritual state that such a one is not hindered or prevented by the very presence and power of the unquenched Spirit of God. If there is silence, none moved to prophesy, this may also indicate a low spiritual state or the existence of un-judged sin in the local assembly.

The “prophets” are **not a special class**. They are not necessarily naturally gifted or spiritually gifted, or ordained, appointed, selected nor “called” by men. Doing this systematically quenches the Holy Spirit of God. It usurps the authority of the Lord to gift and direct those so gifted, and to move whom He will to present what He wants presented to the local assembly. Not only is He in the midst of each local assembly, Matthew 18:20. He is seen in Revelation chapter 1 as the High priest in the midst of all of the local assemblies world wide. They are seen as encircling Him at any given instant, and down through the centuries as well, until He comes for us. He is overseeing all together (there is one Body), and yet overseeing each local assembly as well. There is no other Central Oversight revealed in scripture. He is Head. He knows well each local gathering as His, and lovingly encourages, exhorts, warns, admonishes, rebukes each as specifically needed. We see examples of His supreme authority and faithful tender loving in the letters he dictated to John to be sent to the seven assemblies in seven different cities in Asia (Minor), Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Each is local and has local authority and responsibilities to the Head as the body of Christ in that locale. He ministers to their current local needs through the “angel of the assembly.” Who is this? **The prophets of 1 Corinthians 14!** Why do we think that? In Malachi 2 we learn that the priests are the messengers of God.

Malachi 2:7 For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger <mal'ak> of the LORD of hosts.

The title “angel” is simply “messenger.”

04397 mal'ak, mal-awk' from an unused root meaning to despatch as a deputy; a messenger; specifically, of God, i.e. an angel (also a prophet, priest or teacher):--ambassador, angel, king, messenger.

But all believers are priests, messengers of God.

*Peter 2:5 Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an **holy priesthood**, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. {are: or, be ye} (KJV)*

*1 Peter 2:9 But ye are a chosen generation, a **royal priesthood**, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: {peculiar: or, purchased} {praises: or, virtues} (KJV)*
*Revelation 1:6 and made us a kingdom, **priests to his God and Father**: to him [be] the glory and the might to the ages of ages. Amen. (DBY)*

The prophets that prophesy in the assembly are priestly messengers from the Lord through the Spirit to the Assembly. They are to be respected as that. Yet what they say is to be carefully weighed by “the rest.” That is, the rest of the priests, the rest of the prophets, all of the local assembly.

We are cautioned that whichever prophets speak they must speak one by one. All brothers in the assembly were eligible to speak (prophesy), two or three at any one sitting. There should be recess afterward, for physical relief if nothing else. This also presents opportunity for personal reflection and discussion about what was said and for contact with a speaker with questions, encouragement or concerns. If the assembly wants more it can schedule more meetings on a regular basis or on the spot after a suitable recess. Sometimes distance or difficulty in getting a commonly suitable time for everyone means sequential or combined meetings are appropriate. For instance, a Prayer/Open meeting could follow or precede Remembrance Meeting as long as announced and done in an orderly manner.

Notice there is **no limit given** on the number of **hymns** given out in a meeting or by a given brother. There is no limit to the number of **prayers** in a meeting or by a given brother, whether expressions of praise, supplication, thanksgiving, etc. There is complete liberty for a local assembly as small as two believers to fully function, even if only one is a brother. Some believe the limit of two or three applies only to the meeting specifically announced for ministry of the word, that is, for prophesying. We announce this as the “open meeting” or “open meeting for ministry as the spirit may lead” or the like. However Paul doesn’t seem to limit his guidance about prophesying solely to meetings announced for that purpose. Prophesying may, and properly should, occur in any meeting of the assembly, remembrance, prayer (although not the primary focus) or discipline. (See Acts 15 where only two prophesied, Peter and James, amidst much other discussion, statements of facts and positions.) There appears to be no reason the limit of two or three should not apply.

When assembled, enjoy the loving, holy, orderly liberty of the Spirit in the Lord’s presence!

By Ron Canner, December 3, 2003.