

Freedom and Order in Worship: Paul's Instructions in 1 Corinthians

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There is no lack of discussion and controversy regarding the worship of the Christian church historically and in the present age. These arguments are cast in terms of contemporary versus traditional, urban or suburban, hymnals or screens, or evangelical or liturgical. At the heart of these struggles is the question of the balance of form and structure in the corporate worship gathering and the dynamic freedom of the Spirit of God to enliven and energize the worship of the Body of Christ. This difficulty is not foreign to the New Testament church, as seen in the letters of Paul to the Corinthians. In his first letter, the apostle Paul addresses a host of controversies and overall dysfunction within the Corinthian church and offers rebuke, correction, and edification through the continued exaltation of Christ, desire for unity in the Body of Christ, and the supremacy of the Gospel.

My purpose for this paper is to examine the critical issues at play within 1 Corinthians 14 in light of current research and frame them within the context of the Free Church tradition of worship. Specifically, I discuss how 1 Corinthians 14 provides the rationale and scriptural basis for the balance of form and freedom that is cherished by those in this Free Church tradition.

Admittedly, this is a daunting task, requiring an appropriate approach through which to view and interpret these passages. My study begins with a thorough analysis of the text including discussion of the theological thrusts of the first epistle to the Corinthians. I address the seeming tension inherent in the Corinthian worship practice between the ongoing work of the Spirit through charismatic gifts and expressions and the Apostle's desire to circumscribe this outflow within the context of the edification of the entire worshiping community.

With this exegetical and hermeneutical process completed, I then examine several parallel passages in both the Old and New Testaments that work together to complete the picture that 1 Corinthians 14 paints with regards to both form and freedom in worship. Christ's reflections on worship in the Gospel of John serve as a representative schema through which to view these complementary passages.

Following this analysis, I seek to ground this scriptural reflection within the theological framework of the Free Church tradition. Specifically, I examine the role of the Scriptures, spontaneous prayer, and the corporate response of the people within this tradition and how these emphases draw impetus and example from the 1 Corinthians 14 passage.

Finally, I offer suggestions for current liturgical practice based upon these reflections. These correctives seek to reframe the questions that many worship leaders, church musicians, and ministers ask when they begin to plan worship anew each week. My hope is that

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they will take from this examination a renewed desire for worship that is empowered by the Spirit of God, rooted in the Scripture and the organic, vital faith of the people of God, and expressed in the diversity of gifts within the congregation.

Background of the Corinthian Church

As we begin this journey of discovery of the interplay between form and freedom, attention must be given first to the text at hand. To label the Corinthian church as troubled is to exercise great charity. Its location within the city of Corinth placed this young congregation within a confluence of a variety of socioeconomic, religious, political, and moral forces. Ciampa and Rosner describe the city with specific clarity:

Roman Corinth was prosperous, cosmopolitan, and religiously pluralistic, accustomed to visits by impressive, traveling public speakers and obsessed with status, self-promotion, and personal rights. From a Jewish or Christian viewpoint, as with any pagan city, its inhabitants were marked by the worship of idols, sexual immorality, and greed.²

Gordon Fee likewise describes the city as “at once the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.”³ These pithy descriptions of Corinth alert the reader to the great potential for controversy and dysfunction in the church. The first epistle to the Corinthians clearly denotes that this was, in fact, the case.

Paul’s letter to Corinth was occasioned by reports he received from the church regarding controversial issues as well as a specific letter from the congregation with questions of theology and practice. The issues Paul deals with in this epistle range from questions of authority over the church assembly, immorality, litigation between believers, marriage and singleness, food sacrificed to idols, gender roles, and—the topic at hand—the worship service and the free expression of the spiritual gifts by the gathered community of faith.

Exegesis and Analysis of 1 Corinthians 14

In the chapters leading up to fourteen, Paul addresses Corinthian concerns about the πνευματικῶν (*pneumatikōn*), or spiritual gifts. He details the variety of the gifts of the Spirit and their ultimate goal of good for the Body of Christ (12:7). He goes on to describe the Church through the metaphor of a physical body and utilizes this concept to argue against prejudice and division and to argue for compassionate care (12:25) between the individual members. He concludes the chapter by exhorting the believers to “earnestly desire the higher gifts” (12:31), but then moves to show them “a more excellent way.” This way, of course, is the path of love beautifully captured in the thirteenth chapter of the epistle. In this passage,

² Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 3.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 3.

Paul demonstrates the supremacy of love over the spiritual gifts and places it alongside the great anchors of the gospel: faith, hope, and love.

It is not inconsequential then that Paul would pivot from a discussion of the spiritual gifts, the body of Christ, and the essence of charity to admonitions and instructions of worship in the Corinthian church. These concepts frame the specific mandates and provide clarity to Paul's intent. The fourteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians can be divided into two primary sections: a discussion of the spiritual gifts, specifically speaking in tongues (14:1–25), and the orderly expression of these gifts in worship (14:26–40).

Spiritual Gifts and Intelligibility

Paul connects his previous arguments by imploring the Corinthians to “pursue love” and to “earnestly desire” the πνευματικά. In this instance this term, often translated “spiritual gifts” in line with earlier passages, likely refers more broadly to “things of the Spirit.”⁴ Here Paul emphasizes the life-giving empowerment of the Holy Spirit within the Body of Christ and first uses the imperative διώκετε (*diókete*), meaning to “do something with intense effort and with definite purpose or goal.”⁵ For Paul, the Spirit's work among the Corinthians was not blissful happenstance, but rather was something to be pursued and eagerly sought.

This emphasis is tempered with the corresponding call to seek after the gift of prophecy in order to build up and encourage the body (14:3). This is our first glimpse into the seeming tension found between the free work of the Spirit and the structured limitations of that freedom through the grounding of worship in the edification of the congregation. D. A. Carson connects this tension with the failings of the Corinthians themselves:

At least some Corinthians wanted to measure their maturity by the intensity of their spiritual experiences, without consideration of other constraints, such as love's demands that brothers and sisters in Christ be edified, and thus they become “mature” or advanced, wittingly or unwittingly, in evil, and immature in their thinking.⁶

This description is helpful in orienting our journey through form and freedom. Either position in this spectrum is not a badge of maturity to be proudly displayed, but rather is one adopted in humility and deference to others in the Body of Christ.

The language Paul uses to describe the role of prophecy and interpreted tongues further demonstrates his reorientation of Christian worship in the post-Pentecost age of the Holy Spirit. He describes the role of prophecy as “upbuilding” of other believers (v. 3), speaking in tongues as building up of the individual (v. 4), and the supremacy of the gift of prophecy so that the church itself might be built up (v. 5). Each of these verbs come from the Greek root οἰκοδομέω (*oikodomeō*), which itself is a compound word of δῶμα (*dōma*), meaning

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 662.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 108.

“dome” and οἶκος (*oikos*), meaning “house.”⁷ Together these terms show us Paul’s concern for the Body of Christ to “grow into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21).

We see an immediate connection between Paul’s words here and Christ’s words to the Samaritan woman in John 4. In this well-known dialogue, Jesus radically reorients worship away from a physical location (whether that be Jerusalem or Mount Gerazim) and into the metaphysical realm of “spirit” and “truth.” While there is debate over the precise meaning of both terms, we can unequivocally identify the Holy Spirit as the source of “spiritual worship” regardless of the identity of the πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) (either the spirit of the worshiper or the Holy Spirit). Truth finds its ultimate anchor and reality in the person of Christ (John 14:6) and therefore New Covenant worship finds its locus in the nature and actions of Jesus.

With this new situation in mind, we turn back to the Corinthian church and see these two concepts in dramatic tension. Because the Corinthian believers did not have elaborate temple systems or physical locations for worship, they interpreted their collective worship service in spiritual terms. Larry Hurtado describes this corporate identity:

They did not have temple structures or the elaborate rituals familiar in the larger religious environment, but (perhaps, indeed, therefore) the gathered group was itself a living shrine and their praise and worship spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God. They did not have a priestly order; instead, they saw themselves collectively as a priesthood, all of the them thus specially sacred and their gathering a holy occasion.⁸

One camp saw the manifestation of the Spirit as the true sign of authentic worship, whereas others saw the communication of biblical truth and exhortation through prophecy as the hallmarks of truthful worship. While acknowledging and encouraging both, Paul elevates the proclamation of truth over the free exercise of the Spirit. The freedom of the Spirit was to submit to the form of prophetic utterance so that Christ would be magnified through the corporate worship experience and the continued building up of his body. It is helpful to remember, however, that these prophetic and didactic utterances were themselves manifestations of the Spirit.

Following a discussion of the potential for confusion through the exercise of the gift of tongues in the corporate worship setting, Paul reframes his opening admonitions and exhorts the congregation to “strive to excel” in building up the church (v. 12). The distinctive feature of Paul’s concept of the assembled worshiping community is one of mutual submission for the greater good. In Ephesians 5:18–20, Paul equates the infilling of the Holy Spirit with speaking in “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” offering prayers of thanksgiving to God, and ultimately submitting to each other as a fearful response of worship to Christ. We see the practical application of this Pauline worship theology at work in the Corinthian church as a means of correction, rebuke, and instruction.

⁷ “Οἰκοδομέω,” *The Lexham Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Logos Bible Software, 2011).

⁸ Larry W. Hurtado, *At the Origins of Christian Worship: The Context and Character of Earliest Christian Devotion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 50.

Order in the Exercise of Spiritual Gifts

Following his detailed instructions regarding the exercise of two specific spiritual gifts, Paul turns his attention toward the totality of the worship experience and seeks to offer guidelines and principles. He gives a non-exhaustive list of liturgical actions for the assembled body including the singing of hymns, teaching, revelation, tongues, and interpretation (v. 26). Perhaps the most insightful detail in this passage is that he says “each one has” one of these gifts, thereby implying the radical participatory nature of the Corinthian worship practice. In Chapter 12, Paul identified each individual as a vital member of the body and having an important role to play in the successful function of the assembly.

What on the surface appears to be a positive reflection on the vibrant diversity of gifts at work in the Corinthian church actually serves as a polemic against their selfish ambition and chaotic exercise. Garland describes the situation in this manner: “Paul’s wording suggests a ‘superabundance’ of gifts, the allocation of these gifts among a wide variety of persons, and a gathering buzzing with excitement.”⁹ Paul paints a picture of a congregation filled with individuals eager to prove their spirituality through the sharing of their particular gift. He has already rebuked the church for the selfish manner in which they partook of the Lord’s Table, with each person eating without respect to the others at the table (11:21). This same disregard for others can be seen in this description of Corinthian worship.

Paul seeks to correct this misappropriation of the work of the Spirit by imposing a general order and rubric of the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. Taylor offers a helpful reminder that this type of guideline does “not preclude spontaneity, but even sudden impulses are subject to the principle of peace and order.”¹⁰ Whereas Paul’s early discussion concerned the primacy of the gift of prophecy above tongues on the grounds of its very essence, these instructions are concerned with the actual practice and utilization of the various gifts in worship. Paul provides regulations for both tongues and prophecy and emphasizes the singular expression of each done in an orderly manner. Furthermore, the prophetic utterances are to be evaluated by others in the assembly.

It is at this point where our examination of Paul’s instructions journeys into uncertain exegetical and hermeneutical waters. Verse thirty-two curiously states “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.” While the exact meaning of this statement is not entirely clear, it appears that Paul seeks to distinguish the empowerment of the Holy Spirit from the pagan practices that were common throughout Corinth. Fee provides a beneficial description of this practice:

The Spirit does not “possess” or “overpower” the speaker; he is subject to the prophet or tongues-speaker, in the sense that what the Spirit has to say will be said in an orderly and intelligible way. It is indeed the Spirit who speaks, but he speaks through the controlled instrumentality of the believer’s own mind and tongue.¹¹

⁹ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 657.

¹⁰ Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 28, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 348.

¹¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 692.

These passages seem to indicate a scenario in which competing prophets attempt to usurp the other in displaying the gift through interruption and spontaneous outburst. Paul corrects this behavior by affirming that just as those speaking in the Spirit will declare Jesus is Lord (12:3), likewise Spirit-empowered speakers will only work to edify the church and show humble deference to others.

Paul concludes this line of reasoning by stating that “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (14:33). The term ἀκαταστασίας (*akatastasias*), translated “confusion,” implies the concept of “open defiance to authority, with the presumed intention to overthrow it or to act in complete opposition to its demands.”¹² Garland describes the disorder present as “not attributable to the workings of the Holy Spirit but to narcissistic exhibitionism, disdain for others with ‘lesser’ gifts, and disregard for the common good.”¹³ Paul makes reference to God’s nature to argue for the characteristics that those empowered by that same Spirit should manifest in the assembly.

The next section of Paul’s instructions provides the modern reader with a host of interpretive problems. Here are Paul’s instructions that women “are not permitted to speak” (v. 34) and that if they desire more knowledge should “ask their husbands at home” (v. 35). It is beyond the purpose and scope of this study to examine in detail the meaning of these passages. These specific verses have been the source of great debate within the church for centuries, but they do offer insight into Paul’s attempt to balance issues of form and freedom.

One important point of question is the location of the phrase “as in all the churches of God” at the end of verse thirty-three. Some translations place this phrase at the beginning of Paul’s injunction against female speech (NIV, ESV) whereas others link it with the argument of God’s orderly nature (NASB, KJV). Fee argues convincingly that this phrase should connect with the earlier passages because it corresponds with three similar appeals in the letter (4:17; 7:17; 11:16) and like the other appeals it appears at the end of the sentence.¹⁴ This placement strengthens Paul’s argument for order by making it within the larger context of the other Christian churches in Asia Minor and the surrounding regions.

The varying schools of interpretation concerning the vocal participation of women in Corinthian worship express widely divergent ideas about the source of this offensive participation. Some commentators such as Patterson see this as an injunction against women speaking in tongues.¹⁵ Maier furthers this idea by interpreting this passage in light of a similar passage in 1 Timothy 2 and stating that Paul is instructing them to avoid a “particular kind of speaking” where “each be a separate tongue speaker or be a separate prophetess who herself communicates the word of God to the others present at worship and serves the teacher of the truth to men.”¹⁶ Others interpret this speech as the women evaluating the

¹² Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 495.

¹³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 664.

¹⁴ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 698.

¹⁵ Paige Patterson, *The Troubled, Triumphant Church: An Exposition of First Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 266.

¹⁶ Walter A. Maier, “An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 14:33b–38,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 2–3 (April 1991): 86.

prophecies, with Hensley appropriating this evaluation of prophecy as prophetic speech itself.¹⁷ Jervis notes that “in all probability Paul’s chief concern was the peaceful exercise of prophecy rather than the subordination of women.”¹⁸

The diversity of reflections on this passage lends credence to the thought that Paul’s primary concern was to put specific guidelines and limitations to the free exercise of the gifts. Namely, he posits an orderly procession of speakers, the necessity of interpretation along with evaluation, and the absence of women speakers. In total these stipulations support Paul’s overarching concern for the edification of the congregation and the submission of the individual to the whole.

Paul concludes the chapter as he began it with the instruction to ζηλοῦτε (*zēloute*), or “earnestly desire,” but in this case he lists prophecy as the object of that desire rather than all the spiritual gifts. He does however instruct the Corinthians not to forbid tongue speaking. His final instruction is that “all things should be done decently and in order” (v. 40). Εὐσχημόνως (*euschēmonōs*), translated “decently,” implies “with propriety fittingly, properly, with an implication of pleasing.”¹⁹ Τάξις (*taxin*), from which we derive the word taxonomy, indicates a sequence and orderly succession. Both instructions connect with Paul’s desire to edify the congregation, evangelize the unbeliever, and ultimately glorify God. As Ciampa and Rosner note,

Paul’s instructions in this chapter have all been intended to guide the Corinthians to a more orderly and fitting approach to the use of spiritual gifts in worship so as to better reflect the glory of God. It is God’s glory which is to be our preoccupation in worship, and that can be honored only when we maintain an atmosphere that does not distract people from his glory. Some Corinthians had manifested attitudes and behaviors which had drawn attention to themselves rather than to God, and which reflected a greater concern for self-edification than the edification of others.²⁰

The Free Church Tradition

Now that we have examined the text of 1 Corinthians 14, it is critical to apply the truth and thrust of that text to contemporary practice. What follows attempts to connect specific practices of the Free Church tradition with Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians and demonstrate how these traditions are informed accordingly. This process of examination, interpretation, and ultimate application to the corporate worship experience falls broadly within a discipline of liturgical theology. Modern liturgical theology began in the nineteenth century with the work of Benedictine revivalists, most importantly Dom Prosper Guéranger. It was later championed by theologians, liturgists, and scholars from a diversity of Christian tradi-

¹⁷ Adam Hensley, “Σιγῶ, λαλέω, and Υποτάσσω in 1 Corinthians 14:34 in Their Literary and Rhetorical Context,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55, no. 2 (June 2012): 344.

¹⁸ L. Ann Jervis, “1 Corinthians 14:34–35: A Reconsideration of Paul’s Limitation of the Free Speech of Some Corinthian Women,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 58 (June 1995): 52.

¹⁹ James Swanson, “Εὐσχημόνως,” *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

²⁰ Ciampa and Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, 735.

tions including Roman Catholic (Dom Odo Casel), Anglican (Gregory Dix), and Russian Orthodox (Alexander Schmemmann).²¹ Schmemmann's writing influenced an entire generation of liturgical scholars because of his adept fusion of worship practice and theology. He describes liturgical theology in the following manner:

But then liturgical theology . . . is not that part of theology, that "discipline," which deals with liturgy "in itself," has liturgy as its specific "object," but, first of all and above everything else, the attempt to grasp the "theology" as revealed and through liturgy.²²

Writing concerning doxology and liturgical theology, Lutheran scholar and minister Frank Senn provides a helpful framework with which we can move from exegesis to practice when approaching texts such as 1 Corinthians 14.

Liturgical theology, like exegetical theology, stands between a "text" and its use in theology. This may involve, first of all, the historical critical task of establishing the "text" in its context. This includes the elucidation of the content and provenance of liturgical books and the comparison of one ritual order with another. Theological reflection will be based on this kind of historical and comparative work.²³

These concepts drawn from the Corinthian situation serve to inform and shape all Christian worship practice.

As we now turn our attention to the Free Church tradition and the influence of the logic of 1 Corinthians 14, it is important that we identify the distinguishing characteristics of this group of worshipers. The Free Church tradition developed in the nineteenth century in England but has its roots in the Radical Reformation, pietist congregations, and the Moravian Brethren. These congregations were "free" from the officially mandated state religious practices and functioned in a largely autonomous manner. Contemporary denominations considered "free" would include Baptists, various forms of Pentecostalism and Charismatic churches, and Evangelical Free. While no list of characteristics would be exhaustive, several distinguishing common features of Free Churches are helpful for the present discussion.

Local Autonomy

At the heart of the tradition is the adjective "free." By this these faith groups claim independence from ecclesiastical hierarchies that would seek to order their worship prac-

²¹ Several helpful introductions to liturgical theology include Loris Geldhof, "Liturgy as Theological Norm: Getting Acquainted with 'Liturgical Theology,'" *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 52, no. 2 (2010): 155-76; Gordon Lathrop, "What Is Liturgical Theology?: One North American Lutheran View," *Worship* 87, no. 1 (January 2013): 45-63; and Peter E. Fink, "Towards a Liturgical Theology," *Worship* 47, no. 10 (December 1973): 601-9.

²² Alexander Schmemmann, "Liturgical Theology, Theology of Liturgy, and Liturgical Reform," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1969): 218.

²³ Frank C. Senn, "Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Liturgical Theology, Theologies of Worship, and Doxological Theology," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 9, no. 1 (February 1982): 13.

tices. These congregations exercise great freedom in their worship design, elements, and liturgical actions. They lack prayer books or other liturgical documents, often relying upon tradition and other pragmatic reasoning in their worship structure. At the core of this independence is the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of the believer and the freedom of each congregation to define its polity, organization, and ministry practice. The largest Free Church denomination, the Southern Baptists, encapsulate this priority in Article Six of their belief statement, *The Baptist Faith and Message*:

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord.²⁴

Each Southern Baptist congregation voluntarily cooperates with likeminded congregations that share a common statement of doctrine and participate in the task of missions and evangelism in the United States and abroad, theological higher education, and moral and ethical initiatives.

While there is a consensus of core beliefs by Southern Baptists, the denominational agencies have no direct influence on the practice and ministries of each local congregation. In rare cases, congregations may be disassociated from the national denomination, but there is a diversity of congregations that worship under this umbrella. Each congregation is free to worship in the manner of their choosing, but clearly the practices of other congregations influence their decision-making process. These influences can be likened to Paul's appeal to the Corinthians to align their worship practices with those "as in all the churches of the saints" (14:33).

Outside governmental polity, freedom extends to the worship practices of this tradition. Many of these congregations reject formality and defined liturgical patterns as symptomatic of mainline denominational traditions of moderate to liberal theological persuasions. Gene Bartlett describes this position succinctly:

After all, our free churches have had a deep-rooted suspicion of "formalism." Though the passing generations have left us vague about the actual historical reasons for this suspicion the feeling is real and present. Without defining it clearly, we carry the haunting feeling that worship which takes on much form is "too Catholic" or that it somehow hampers the free movement of the Holy Spirit among our people. We have associated the growth of outward form with the loss of inward spirit.²⁵

This desire for the free movement of the Spirit echoes the Corinthian situation, albeit without the charismatic manifestations in many congregations. The loosely structured worship ele-

²⁴ <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

²⁵ Gene E. Bartlett, "Worship: The Ordered Proclamation of the Gospel," *Review & Expositor* 62, no. 3 (1965): 276.

ments of this tradition mirror the Corinthians where each “had a hymn, a lesson, a revelation” and other spiritual contributions (14:26). This passage demonstrates another value of the Free Church tradition—namely, active participation by the laity in worship. Many congregations utilize laypeople in a large diversity of worship leadership positions. Even the prized role of the proclamation of the Gospel through the sermon is not infrequently filled by “lay preachers,” or those “sensing a call to ministry.” While largely led by ordained ministers, the celebrations of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Table are occasionally celebrated by laity. In many congregations, the only role which must be filled by someone ordained and recognized as clergy is that of senior pastor.

In this manner, the Free Church tradition embodies the core positive Corinthian worship practice of active congregational participation. Obviously, this value is shared by other traditions that order their worship through defined liturgies and prayer books, but the democratic nature of this tradition led by spiritual ministers and pastors typifies the Corinthian custom. In his comprehensive examination of the theology and worship of the Free Church tradition, Christopher Ellis defines the freedom that is so cherished by these congregations:

This freedom is the freedom of local congregations to order their own gatherings for worship; it is the freedom of spontaneity which is open to the extempore guidance of the Holy Spirit; and it is the freedom of a particular worshiping community to respond to the reading and preaching of Scripture addressed to them as God’s living Word.²⁶

Supremacy of the Word in Worship

This freedom of polity and worship is balanced in the Free Church tradition by a fierce commitment to the supremacy of the Word of God in all matters of practice and theology. The majority of these congregations employ a rigid hermeneutic which views the Scriptures as authoritative for practice and doctrine, often employing modifiers such as “infallible” and “sufficient” when describing the Scriptures. When discussing the freedom of these congregations, James White captures the heart of the commitment to Scripture: “Behind this autonomy is a deeper concern, the desire to be free to follow God’s word. This has often led to a deep suspicion of all that is not provided for in Scripture, including the refusal to use fixed prayer, hymns, and ceremonies.”²⁷ The Word of God serves to provide structure and limits to the freedom of expression in these churches.

While most Free Churches would reject the notion of a regulative principle in Scripture concerning worship, they would look to the Bible as the basis and guide for their services. This emphasis upon the Word of God is seen in the prominent place of the sermon in the order of service. As the sermon increases in importance, the ordinances and other traditional liturgical responses decline in frequency of celebration and priority. The historical pattern of Word and Table is replaced with one of music, sermon, and response. In this “ordo,” music is often imbued with sacramental power as a means by which the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is communicated to the congregation.

²⁶ Christopher J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 27.

²⁷ James F. White, “Traditions of Protestant Worship,” *Worship* 49, no. 5 (May 1975): 276.

While the elevation of Scripture as the authority and priority for worship is necessary and laudable, pitfalls can emerge. Just as the Corinthians fell prey to the tendency to value one type of gift to another, Free Church traditions tend to value the intellectual understanding of the texts over others, such as intuition, emotion, and embodiment. Melanie Ross identifies another potential obstacle, “the fact that different parts of the church read Scripture in profoundly different way compounds the difficulty of writing an ecumenical liturgical theology.”²⁸ The guiding principles in Scripture are mitigated by an often inconsistent interpretation and application.

Despite these challenges, the Word of God retains its shaping role in Free Church worship. This same emphasis emerges from a careful reading of 1 Corinthians 14. Paul’s insistence on the priority of prophecy over tongues is, in reality, a commitment to the communicated Word of God in worship. According to 14:3, prophecy “speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.” This language is strikingly similar to Paul’s description of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where he declares it to be “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” The interpretation, proclamation, and teaching of the Word of God serve as the means by which the freedom of worship and practice are guided and provided a form in the Free Church tradition.

Spontaneous Prayer

The third pillar of Free Church worship that parallels the Corinthian situation is the commitment to spontaneous prayer. In their rejection of rubrics and prayer books, these congregations rely upon the cultivation of daily habits of prayer, Scripture reading, and individual piety to guide the members of the congregation to lead in public prayer. Paul Fiddes distinguishes between “free” prayer and “extempore” prayer:

Extempore prayer draws spontaneously resources of Scripture, memory, and spiritual experience from within those praying in the very moment that they speak to God. “Free” prayer may be distinguished from this, as requiring a “pre-meditation” which involves the preparation of the heart as well as a deliberate reflection on the subjects for prayer.²⁹

This description is helpful in our examination of the relationship of the Corinthians to the Free Church tradition. The close connection between the private devotional practice of prayer and the public exercise of prayer finds a parallel in the prayer in tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:2.

While there is considerable disagreement on the nature of the type of *glossolalia* experienced by the Corinthians and its relationship to the practice in Acts 2, Paul at least affirms the value of the practice of tongues as a means for private communion with God. The problem arose as this devotional practice made its way to the assembly of the saints. In his

²⁸ Melanie C. Ross, *Evangelical versus Liturgical?: Defying a Dichotomy*, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 57.

²⁹ Paul S. Fiddes, “Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation,” *Ecumenical Review* 54, no. 1 (January–April 2002): 35.

eloquent comparison between the use of the spirit and the mind in prayer and praise (vv. 13–19), Paul grounds his logic again in the edification of the congregation. Paul encourages the freedom of this type of prayer, but limits its form by requiring interpretation (v. 13) or silence if there is no interpretation (v. 21).

These words provide a helpful guard to the extemporaneous prayer found in many “free” congregations. It is the author’s personal experience in divergent congregations that there is a deficiency of understanding and exercise of corporate prayer in these churches. The desire for spirituality and personal expression found in many of these prayers fails to capture the essence of corporate prayer—to guide and offer collectively the prayers of the saints to God. As Ellis again states concerning this type of prayer, “it exemplifies a spirituality which expresses not only freedom from central control, but dependence upon divine guidance and help.”³⁰ This desire for Spirit-led expression and guidance is a noble one, but it must be tempered by an understanding that the other members of the congregation must be able to offer their affirmation and endorsement of the spoken prayer. Too often this is hindered by a lack of consistency in the logic of prayer, repetition of various addresses to God, and the disconnect between the other elements of the corporate worship experience. Like the Corinthians, the private prayer is offered up in the midst of the congregation without great thought or concern for each member of the Body. Again, we see that the freedom found in this type of prayer finds its limits and structure in the need for edification.

Promise, Potential, and Peril of the Free Church Tradition

As we conclude our examination of 1 Corinthians 14 and its synonymous patterns in the Free Churches, I offer several comments that point to the promise, potential, and peril of this tradition. These insights draw from Paul’s words to the Corinthians and apply them to contemporary worship practice. The goal is to gently correct and adjust perspectives with regard to the issues and realign our liturgical expressions to the pattern of Scripture.

One of the dangers found in many congregations today is the growing divide between the pastors, worship leaders, and ministers and the congregations which they serve. Worship has become a spectacle in which eager congregants observe with hopes of gaining some vague sense of intellectual understanding, emotional connection, and communal experience. The introduction of the various trappings of contemporary worship that mirror those of popular culture concerts, including theatrical lighting, darkened auditoriums, expensive sound systems, and elaborate video projection, reinforces the distance between those on the stage and those in the audience. The giftedness of the preacher or musician is elevated, packaged, and sold in the church bookstore.

Sadly, this dichotomy is the natural result of the revivalist tendencies that dominated the Free Church tradition in the previous two centuries. The dynamic pairing of musician and minister was duplicated for generation after generation. These “heroes of the faith” have received near mythic status in the minds and hearts of many believers. In some ways, these attitudes reflect the Corinthian view of the superiority of the so-called miracle gifts to the exclusion of others for the equipping of ministry. Our congregations must recover the appreciation of the giftedness of the entire assembly, not just the obviously gifted leadership. In

³⁰ Ellis, *Gathering*, 35.

this new framework, we approach each member of the body of Christ as a potential contributor and vehicle for the work of God rather than a mere spectator.

Secondly, we must strive against the radical individuality that permeates our age and our corporate worship services. The same elements that contribute to the view of worship as spectacle reinforce the individualist attitudes of many in the congregation. Paul repeatedly puts forth the vision of a fully functioning body of believers exercising its giftedness under the power and impetus of the Holy Spirit. The continuing edification of each member of the Body of Christ is the standard to which the Corinthian church and those who minister in the present are held.

This individualistic emphasis is clearly seen in the often-expressed desires of many to have the form of worship reflect their personal preferences and stylistic choices. These opinions are frequently held without regard to the greater good of the congregation or expressed with the attitude of mutual submission. Ralph Martin powerfully describes what is at stake with this attitude: “The thought that the Church at worship is an accidental convergence in one place of a number of isolated individuals who practice, in hermetically sealed compartments, their own private devotional exercise, is foreign to the New Testament picture.”³¹ Fostering awareness of the larger congregation and its needs would pay great dividends for churches in the Free Church tradition. What is lost in many cases with the choice of freedom over form is the specific engagement as an assembled body rather than individuals in need of conversion.

The covenantal nature of the Free Churches should be a tremendous aid in this struggle against self-centeredness and individualist myopia. The mutual submission to one another as members of a specific congregation reminds each member of their created goal and enables them to fulfill this ultimate purpose. Grenz observes,

As Christians we enjoy not only a personal goal but also a shared identity. This identity becomes ours as we exemplify the goal for which we were created. God desires that we reflect his own image — that we exemplify the pattern of life which characterizes the triune God. . . . Because God is a social reality, it is only in relationship—in community—that we are able to reflect the divine nature. . . . For this reason, we are dependent on the community of Christ in the task of reflecting the image of God.³²

By developing an understanding and appropriation of the truth of our communal identity, we can fulfill Paul’s mandate to do all things for the edification of the Body while maintaining the freedom of the individual to exercise his or her spiritual and natural giftedness.

Lastly, Free Churches have a great deal to learn from their more liturgical sibling traditions. It is possible to reject stodgy, structured liturgical formulas while adopting the heart of the dialogical nature of many of these worship patterns. By giving greater attention to matters of spiritual and liturgical functionality, Free Churches can enliven and rejuvenate worship services. These attitudes have the refreshing quality of freeing congregations from the unspoken need to “climb the mountain” each week and to surpass the previous gathering’s spiritual, intellectual, and emotional contributions.

³¹ Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 135.

³² Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 501.

Sadly, this is the very trap into which many congregations fall. Harold Watkins captures the essence of this failing: “There has, unfortunately, been more ardor than understanding, more aping than intelligent learning and adoption of meaningful forms.”³³ Leaders must take to heart Paul’s words to “let all things be done decently and in order” while maintaining the space in which the Spirit can move and work freely. Byron Anderson offers a helpful warning of the pitfalls of succumbing to excess in one position or the other:

We must avoid idolatries of the book—that is, of form—in which we believe that nothing in the book or in the tradition is dispensable from the liturgy. We must also avoid the idolatries of freedom, in which we believe that everything is dispensable. Somewhere between the two lies the truth of our life together.³⁴

It is with those words that we bring our study to a close. Christian worship truly is a journey of “life together.” To this journey we bring with us the twin virtues of freedom and form. Each allows for connection with God, spiritual growth, and proclamation of the Gospel. Both must be tempered with a view of the overall good of the congregation to the deference of individual preferences and expressions. Anderson continues,

Form and freedom. One without the other is unfaithful to the gospel and denies the life-giving character of the good news. Form without freedom spurns the grace-filled life. Freedom without form spurns the character of discipleship, of following the way of Christ when it goes against our nature or character. The discipline of worship—our public wrestling with form and freedom—fights against our tendency to transform everything into our own image.³⁵

Ultimately we are called to be a “royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet 2:9) so that we will be faithful witnesses to the inspiring empowerment of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the Gospel and the ongoing power of form to guide our practices, shape our spirituality, and inform our intellects. We need both form and freedom more than perhaps we can even imagine. 1 Corinthians opens the door and gives a vantage point into the purpose of the church—we must have the courage to hold these virtues in dynamic tension for the sake of the Gospel and the good of the church and the world.

³³ Harold Keith Watkins, “Liturgy and the Free Church,” *Encounter* 23, no. 2 (1962): 198.

³⁴ E. Byron Anderson, “Form and Freedom: The Discipline of Worship,” *Encounter* 60, no. 3 (1999): 278.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.