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LITURGICAL ORDER AND GLOSSOLALIA: 1 CORINTHIANS 14:26c-33a AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Problem. Though the practice of glossolalia, understood as continuing the phenomenon described in 1 Cor 14, has spread through both Catholic and Protestant denominations, it has remained something of a puzzle among Christians, some of whom regard it as a mark of genuine faith, while others look upon it as a repellent distraction. Inasmuch as verses 26c-33a of this chapter highlight and summarize the directives by which Paul sought to regulate the practice among the Corinthians, a careful exegesis of these verses provides a basis upon which the topic of glossolalia in the chapter as a whole might be most clearly explicated and proper contemporary applications might be drawn.

Method and Results. Chap. 1 examines previous works and reveals that major monographs on tongues lean toward topical or phenomenological approaches, while exegesis of 1 Cor 14 is virtually confined to commentaries and articles. The topical studies show little agreement concerning the function of glossolalia, while the exegetical works show remarkable agreement concerning the importance of Corinthian tongues as an ecstatic prayer experience.

Chap. 2 attempts to reconstruct aspects of the context that affected Corinthian attitudes. It appears that several influences created a predilection toward enthusiasm among Corinthian believers, so that they fell easy prey to over-emphasis and lack of order, which Paul attempted to correct, while at the same time preserving the value of charismatic gifts.

The exegesis in chap. 3 suggests that glossolalia as a charism was intended as a personal, spiritual uplift which was both a gift from God and a glorification or praise directed to God. The exegesis also indicates that while Paul's directives disapprove of uncontrolled public glossolalia, they do not deny that the phenomenon, practiced privately (or interpreted for the church), had value.

From the exegesis in chap. 3, several applications for the contemporary church are made in chap. 4. For example, the diverse gifts which Paul has listed indicate his acceptance of diversity in the procedures of orderly worship. So, although the temptation to exploitation is close at hand, modern Christians should be cautious about criticizing fellow-Christians who express their spiritual vitality in enthusiastic ways.