

Multi-voiced Worship: The Anabaptist Perspective, 1536

Background: The Anabaptists, especially in the Swiss and South German traditions, believed that the worship of Christian congregations should involve the participation of many members. They based this on Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in which chapter 14 envisages worship that is multi-voiced: "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation" (verse 26). This chapter had largely lain dormant since the fourth century when, with the reign of Constantine and the advent of a society-encompassing Christendom Church, congregations became large and were often led by one priest or pastor. The Anabaptists rediscovered this neglected part of the New Testament and attempted to act in light of it. This caused consternation in both Catholic and Protestant circles. In the document on which this dialogue is based, the Swiss Anabaptists are in debate with a Reformed church leader.

Requirements: Three persons

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Narrator: In the year 1532, Anabaptists were challenged to answer the question, "Why do they not attend worship in the Reformed state churches that have broken with Catholicism?" Tim is an Anabaptist leader; Matt is a Swiss Reformed pastor.

Tim and Matt stand opposite of each other.

Matt: You must explain this. Why, when the law clearly requires that you attend church on Sunday, why do you not attend the church? What is your defense?

Tim: We live by the Scriptures. And there we read—in 1 Corinthians 14—that Paul says to the church of God that they are to pursue love and to strive for the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. Now, prophesying is receiving understanding from God and sharing it with others, encouraging them and consoling them.

Matt: But surely that is what the preachers do in our churches!

Tim: Perhaps, but Paul said that all Christians, when something is revealed to them that will edify others, are bound by Christian love to speak of it in the congregation. And only then they should be silent again, according to 1 Corinthians 14, verse 26, which says, "When you come together, each one [note, *each* one] has a hymn, or a word of instruction, or a prophecy. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church."

Matt: Ah ha! (*points his finger*) But Paul says at the end of the same chapter, "Let all things be done decently and in order." Your actions are anything but decent and orderly. Anything but! None of you have proper evangelical order for worship. You have not been trained or ordained. So none of you should open your mouths in worship.

Tim: So you think that, after you have preached, we should remain silent, regardless of what we may have been given to say for edification. But according to 1 Corinthians 14, the listeners must judge the preacher's doctrine. In your churches all judgment is suspended and everything that the preacher teaches—whether good or evil—has to be swallowed by the listener.

Matt: That is because we regard Paul's words that "all may prophesy" to refer only to the ministers. Only the preachers are prophets.

Tim: Even if that were so, there would always be more than one person, more than one voice, in the congregation. But anyway, it seems clear to us that Paul's teaching applies to the whole congregation. It applies to all the members of Christ's body so that when we come together, each one has a gift given by the Spirit. We worship according to what Paul says. Why don't you?

Source: Shem Peachey, ed., "Answer of Some who are called Anabaptists – Why they do not attend the churches (1532)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 45 (1971), 11-14.

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