

"Two, or at the most three."

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The first epistle to the Corinthians undoubtedly gives us the mind of God as to the inner working of the assembly on earth. Not divine counsels (as in Ephesians) but divine order is the main thought of the Spirit of God in that epistle. Amongst much other valuable instruction, we have in 1 Corinthians 12-14. the manifestations of the Spirit in the various members of the body of Christ, with the rules which should govern those manifestations. In 1 Corinthians 12, it is laid down that divers gifts have been divinely distributed amongst Christ's members here below, all of which should be in exercise for the edification of the whole body. Not concentration, but distribution, is God's idea. Following this is the well-known chapter on love — that precious divine quality which is so necessary if all the machinery of the assembly is to work harmoniously and for blessing. To this is added in 1 Corinthians 14 many practical rules concerning the public exercise of the gifts. It has often been urged that these rules are virtually obsolete now, because the two gifts specially named — tongues and prophesying — have ceased to exist in the Church. To this we must reply that if certain gifts have been withdrawn from us, the great truth on which all is based, the presence of the Holy Ghost in the Church, remains as true as ever. The reason why the apostle says so much about tongues and prophesying is because the Corinthians were foolishly ignorant as to the relative value of those gifts. The first-named, being the most showy, had a very large place in their minds, and was apparently being freely used when the assembly came together, in forgetfulness of the fact that the object of tongues was for a sign to them that are without (verse 22); prophesying, on the other hand, being an essentially spiritual gift (verse 3) was naturally at a discount amongst a people whose condition was carnal and infantine (1 Corinthians 3: 1). But while the assembly on earth remains the temple of God, indwelt by the Holy Ghost (1 Corinthians 3: 16, 17), the rules divinely laid down in chapter 14 have their full application to all the gifts which God still permits us to possess and enjoy.

To come to the words at the head of this paper. In verse 27 we read, "If any man speak in a tongue, let it be by two, or at the most, by three." In verse 29, also, "Let the prophets speak two or three." There is no mistaking the force of these instructions. Those possessing gifts were not to suffer their desire to exercise them, to overpower them (verse 32); not more than two or three were to speak at one session. This deserves the earnest attention of all who would please God in the assembly at the present time. On special occasions, when saints come together at convenient centres for mutual edification, there is a great danger of these divine limitations being disregarded. Speakers, in their longing to impart as much spiritual instruction as possible to their brethren, and hearers in their desire to hear the voices of servants of Christ whom they value and love, are apt to transgress the Spirit's rules, without perhaps considering that they are doing so. Yet Leviticus 5: 15, and many kindred Scriptures, shew that sin cannot be viewed lightly, even if committed unwittingly. It should be confessed and judged in its true character before God.

The measure prescribed by the Holy Spirit naturally commends itself to the mind as good and wise. Is it possible to carry away from a meeting the substance of more than two or three valuable discourses? (I say "valuable," for that which has no value should never be intruded upon the assembled saints). If more discourses are given, is it not just so much waste? And are we not in some danger of developing "itching ears," if our desire to hear has no limit? Is it not infinitely better to attend humbly and devoutly to a little given to us from God, exercising our consciences and searching our hearts in

the light of it, than to flippantly gulp down a mass of matter that in the result leaves us no spiritual gain?

Some public holidays are just passed. Tidings which have come to hand from various quarters, concerning special meetings which have been held, have suggested these few remarks. May the Lord, in His mercy, lead us all into deeper conformity with His own blessed Word and ways.