Strangers and Pilgrims on Earth

Essays in Honour of Abraham van de Beek

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TWO CHURCH FATHERS REVIEW CHARISMATIC WORSHIP
AMBROSIASTER'S AND CHRYSOSTOM'S COMMENTS ON
1 CORINTHIANS 11–14

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Introduction

Since in view of his systematic reflections Bram van de Beek displayed a keen interest in the Church Fathers and actively stimulated research into their writings, it is with pleasure that I offer a patristic contribution to the Fest-schrift in his honour. As part of my research on patristic interpretation of 1 Corinthians I will give an impression of the way in which two church fathers of the last decades of the fourth century C.E. commented on 1 Corinthians 11–14. In these chapters Paul deals with the worship of the first Christians in Corinth. Using Ambrosiaster’s and John Chrysostom’s running commentaries on this epistle as my sources, I will show how these authors looked back on the charismatic meetings of the first Corinthian Christians.¹

Analysis of 1 Corinthians 11–14

First, I will briefly analyse the information about the Corinthians’ worship that can be deduced from these chapters.

From 1 Corinthians 11–14 we learn that in the first Corinthian congregation all Christians could contribute something to their common worship. Paul writes: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.”² A thanksgiving uttered by

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¹ I am preparing a book on patristic interpretations of 1 Corinthians in the series Novum Testamentum Patristicum (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht). Apart from articles in this field, I published De uitleg van Paulus’ eerste brief aan de Corinthis in de tweede en derde eeuw [The Interpretation of Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians in the Second and Third Centuries] (Kampen: Kok, 1996).
² Previous versions of this paper served as lectures in the Református Kollegium in Debrecen, Hungary, on 18 June 2010 and at the international conference of the Society of Biblical Studies and the European Association of Biblical Studies in Tartu, Estonia, on 27 July 2010.
one member could be confirmed by others saying "Amen." Paul reckons speaking in tongues among the gifts of God's Spirit, but since it is unintelligible, he prescribes that in the assembly it has to be interpreted either by the speaker himself or by someone who has the gift of interpretation. Paul criticizes the fact that several members spoke in tongues at the same time and without interpretation. Therefore he writes that the number of those who speak in tongues should be limited to two or three, and that they should speak in turn. Rather than speaking in tongues in common worship he prefers the gift of prophecy, which he describes as "speaking to other people for their building up and encouragement and consolation." Prophecy, in any case, is understandable. In order to prevent confusion, however, Paul does not allow that several prophets speak at the same time. Therefore he writes: "Let two or three prophets prophesy, and let the others weigh what is said." We learn that women too were entitled to pray and to prophesy, although Paul's point is not to inform us about that, but to admonish the women that, contrary to them, they had to veil their heads. It is striking that in spite of the evidence of prayers and prophecies uttered by women, the canonical text of 1 Corinthians also says that women were to be silent in the churches, that they were not permitted to speak, and that they should ask their husbands at home in case they desired to know something. Most probably this text was a gloss added by an early editor of Paul's epistles, which has subsequently been inserted into the text of the epistle itself. Thus we can understand why several manuscripts and ancient commentaries have these words at the end of this chapter, after 1 Corinthians 14:40. This means that in the earliest textual transmission the marginal note about women has been inserted in two different places.

Furthermore, we learn that the Corinthians held common meals at the end of the workdays, and that, when some members had eaten and drunk already, others were still hungry. Apparently, the celebration of the Lord's Supper was part of these common meals, but Paul's criticism of the Corinthians' practice is so fierce that he writes that when they come together it is not the Lord's Supper. We can deduce from his remarks that the well-to-do used to start the meal without waiting for the poor who had to work hard and could not come earlier. Paul instructs the rich to eat and drink in their own houses if they cannot wait for the others. Interestingly, Paul quotes the tradition concerning the institution of the Lord's Supper which, partly in other words, is also found in the synoptic Gospels. He does not inform us on which days the Corinthians had their common meals. In 1 Corinthians 16:2, however, he suggests that they put aside something for the collection for the church in Jerusalem "on the first day of every week," and this most probably implies that the Christians came together on that day at least, but he does not say so explicitly. Neither does Paul clarify how the common meals discussed in 1 Corinthians 11:20-34 are related to the charismatic worship described in 1 Corinthians 14. We may assume that the gatherings started with the meal and were continued by prophetic teachings, speaking in tongues etcetera.

Another observation is, that Paul reckons with the possibility that unbelieving outsiders may enter the meeting in which Christians spoke in tongues and prophesied, and might be either critical about the lack of order, or impressed by the presence of God in their midst.

It is noteworthy, that in this epistle Paul does not address the leaders of the Corinthian congregation in particular, although among the different functions in the church he does enumerate "teachers" and "forms of leadership." Probably the Christians met in a spacious private house belonging to one of the rich members. The host may have conducted the meal and may have served as the leader of the charismatic worship to the extent this was considered necessary, but nowhere does Paul clearly say so. However, at the end of his epistle he refers to the household of

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41 Cor. 14:26. 42 Cor. 12:10; 14:2. 5, 9, 13 etc. 5 Cor. 14:27. 7 Cor. 14:4-5. 8 Cor. 14:29. 9 Cor. 11:4-6, 13. 10 Cor. 14:34-35. 11 For the contents, cf. 1 Tim. 2:11-15, which is often considered deuter- (or pseudo-) Pauline.

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See the excursus in G.D. Fee, God's Empowering Presence. The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul (Peabody, Mass., 1994) 277-282. To the textual testimonies that he mentions one may add the anonymous commentary published by H.J. Frede, Ein neuer Paulustext und Kommentar II. Die Texte (AGLB 8; Freiburg: Herder, 1974), 161, which dates from 396-405 C.E.
Stephanas, whose members had "devoted themselves to the service of the saints," and he urges the Corinthians to put themselves "at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them." Perhaps Stephanas was the host and the leader of the first Corinthian church, but Paul does not say so explicitly. We have to be aware that he did not write a church order, but an occasional letter in which he reacted to a situation that was known to his readers and in which, therefore, he could pass over in silence everything that he took for granted.

It would not be wise to assume that everywhere in earliest Christianity the local churches practiced the same charismatic worship as Paul describes in his first epistle to the Corinthians, but there are a number of texts that do remind us of such meetings. In the course of the centuries, however, such free worship hardly continued in the 'catholic' church, but it has been maintained by Montanists and other smaller groups.

We will now proceed to concentrate on the commentaries of two church fathers from the period in which the Catholic church had obtained a privileged position in the Roman empire. I will present them in a chronological order.

**Ambrosiaster**

The first complete extant commentary on 1 Corinthians was written in Latin, during the period in which Damasus was bishop of Rome (366–384 C.E.). Unfortunately we do not know the name of its author who, by the way, wrote commentaries on all of the Pauline epistles collected in the New Testament canon. Erasmus of Rotterdam proved that the Medieval attribution of these commentaries to Ambrose of Milan could not be maintained, and hence the author is called Ambrosiaster, which means pseudo-Ambrose. The author most likely lived in Rome.

Although Ambrosiaster is aware of the time that had elapsed since Paul, in general he is inclined to interpret 1 Corinthians 11–14 as if Paul's admonitions apply directly to his own church, and to pass over the differences. He explains that the "varieties of gifts" refer to the ministries of the church, which are inspired by the Spirit and cannot be attributed to human merits. The fact that in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 Paul mentions the Spirit, the Lord and God parallel to each other, elicits Ambrosiaster's comment on contemporary debates on God's trinity; he says that each of the three are God and that the three are one God. In his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 11:4 he explains that "to prophesy" means to proclaim the coming of the Lord with the words of the creed (symbolum) after prayer, which undoubtedly refers to prayer in the liturgy. Elsewhere, however, he says that a prophet is someone who foretells the future, such as Agabus, or someone who interprets the scriptures.

Ambrosiaster explains that someone who speaks in tongues speaks to God in an unknown language that is known to God, and he underlines Paul's view that, when all speak in different tongues, the result is a tumult of people suffering from frenzy. He faithfully repeats Paul's admonition that two or three are allowed to speak in tongues one by one, and then only if their words are translated; he adds that speaking in tongues may not last the whole day, so that the prophets would have no time to explain the scriptures. However, he does not give the impression that these phenomena occur in the church of his own time in the way in which Paul describes them. Ambrosiaster assumes that those who, in Paul's time, boasted of their Hebrew descent, spoke Aramaic or Hebrew in their sermons and orations, by way of recommendation. In his own time these

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1 Cor. 12:4.

Ad *Corinthios prima* 13, 4–6 (CSEL 81, 2, 132–134); cf. Ad *Corinthios prima* 14, 21, 1 (CSEL 81, 2, 155) for an allusion to the Nicene creed (*Christum deo deum praedicavit*).


Ad *Corinthios prima* 12, 25; 14, 4; 14, 32; 14, 39 (CSEL 81, 2, 141; 150; 160; 162).

Ad *Corinthios prima* 14, 2; 14, 33 (CSEL 81, 2, 150; 157). Remarkably, Ambrosiaster omits the words "to another [are] given" various kinds of tongues" from 1 Cor. 12:10 and does not comment on this gift in that context.

Ad *Corinthios prima* 14, 27 (CSEL 81, 2, 158–159).

Cf. 2 Cor. 11:22.

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Hebrews are imitated, according to Ambrosiaster, by those Christians who prefer to speak a foreign language in the church. Thus he applies Paul's instruction about speaking in tongues to those whose native language is Latin, but who prefer to recite the creed or to sing hymns in Greek because they enjoy the sound of the words although they do not understand them. In Rome, Greek had been the language for worship up to the third century, during which Latin gradually became more common. We see here, however, that Greek elements of Christian worship survived in Roman worship until the second half of the fourth century, and that this use of the Greek language was cherished by some of the Christians.

Commenting on the institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23–25, Ambrosiaster does not explain that in Corinth the eucharist used to be part of the common meal. On the contrary, he writes that the mystery of the eucharist is not a meal, but a spiritual medicine which, if tasted with reverence, purifies the one who is devoted to it. He characterizes this meal as an “oblation” or “oblations;” this term refers to the sacrificial understanding of the eucharist that was common in the early church. Commenting on the possibility that an unbeliever or outsider enters the meeting, Ambrosiaster says that contrary to the pagan celebrations, in which the eyes are veiled so that the sacred objects are not perceived, in Christian worship nothing is hidden, and nothing is veiled (nihil sub velamine).

In his view, the apostles mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28 are represented by the bishops of his own time, and Paul's rhetorical question “Are all apostles?” refers to the fact that in a church there is only one bishop. Ambrosiaster explains that the “teachers” mentioned in the same context are those who teach the boys to read and familiarize them with the readings from scripture, in the same way as is done in the synagogue. He gives another interesting reference to the synagogue in his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:33, which reads that “you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged.” He explains that this is the tradition of the synagogue, which we want to follow; for admittedly he [Paul] writes to Christians, that is to say, to those who descend from the Gentiles, not from the Jews. His intention is that they debate, the elderly people sitting on chairs because of their dignity, the following generation on benches, and the youngsters on mats on the floor.

In this passage, Ambrosiaster most probably does not refer to the common eucharistic worship, but rather to Bible study meetings. Although Jerome informs us that in the time of his Abbonist, aristocratic women like Marcella discussed the scriptures and even learned Hebrew, Ambrosiaster would not allow women to participate in such debates. He does not pay any attention to the aspect of Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 that in Corinth women were allowed to prophesy if they covered their heads. From this chapter, Ambrosiaster highlights the inferiority of women to men, and maintains that women have not been created according to God's image and are not entitled to speak in the church, because it is the priest or the bishop who represents Christ. In his view, women have to veil their heads out of reverence for the bishops, who are called angels in 1 Corinthians 11:10. Ambrosiaster briefly repeats this view on women in his comments on 1 Corinthians 14:34–35. He quotes this passage at the very end of the entire chapter, after 1 Corinthians 14:40. This also appears in his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:33 or after 1 Corinthians 14:40.

In spite of Ambrosiaster's inclination to apply Paul’s instruction directly to his own church, he still is aware of the time that has elapsed since Paul. He wonders why it does not happen in his own time that people have God's gift (gratiam dei), by which he means the more conspicuous gifts such as performing miracles and exorcizing demons. His answer is that these gifts were necessary in the beginning, in order to give a solid foundation to the Christian faith. He affirms: "But now it is not necessary, since one people leads another people to the faith when their good works and plain preaching come to light."
John Chrysostom

The second complete commentary on 1 Corinthians that has been preserved is in fact a collection of homilies. They have been delivered by John Chrysostom when he served as a priest in the church of Antioch, Syria (386–398 C.E.).

Like Ambrosiaster, he refers to the trinitarian debates in his interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12:4–6, which deals with the gifts bestowed by the Spirit, the Lord, and God. He observes that Paul does not confuse the hypostases of Father, Son, and Spirit, but declares the equal honour to God’s essence. If Paul had considered the one inferior to the other, Chrysostom remarks, he could not console the person who was vexed.45

Contrary to Ambrosiaster, however, Chrysostom more often pays attention to the differences between the first Corinthian church and the church of his own time. He thinks that the Corinthian Christians first celebrated the “mysteries,” by which he means the eucharist, after which they had a common meal in which the poor shared in the provisions of the rich.46 Chrysostom understands that originally the Christians met in houses, for he says: “Formerly, private houses were churches.”47 He explains that at that time those who were baptized spoke in tongues and prophesied, and some of them performed miracles.48 Unlike Ambrosiaster, he does not conceal that in Paul’s time women used to pray and also to prophesy; concerning the gift of prophecy he refers to the daughters of Philip, who were prophetesses, and the prophecy of Joel about prophesying sons and daughters.49 He shares the view already held by Origen, that the tongues in which they spoke were existing languages, such as Persian, Latin, and Indian, and that the apostles received this gift in order to preach the Gospel in foreign countries.50 He says that the gift of discernment of spirits was necessary to distinguish between a Gentile diviner or soothsayer who spoke in ecstasy and under compulsion, and a Christian prophet who spoke with a sober mind and knew what he said.51 Prophecies had to be discerned in order to prevent that a diviner intrude into their meetings and act as a prophet, whereas in reality he was inspired by the devil.52 Chrysostom also understands that in Paul’s time Christians used to make psalms by virtue of a charismatic gift and to teach by virtue of such a gift.53 In spite of Paul’s criticism of the confusion and disorder of the Corinthian meetings, Chrysostom calls the church of that time “heaven” in which the Spirit governed all things and inspired the leaders.54 In one homily he wonders why the spectacular manifestations of the Spirit of that time do not happen anymore.55 In another homily he explains Paul’s words that “prophecies will come to an end” and “tongues will cease”56 by saying that these gifts had been introduced in order to lead people to faith; and since the faith has been disseminated everywhere, the use of these gifts has grown superfluous.57 Love, however, never ends,58 and therefore Chrysostom says to his flock that even if they worked miracles and raised the dead, they would never astonish the Gentile Greek so much as by their humble, kind and mild behaviour, since nothing can attract people so strongly as love.59

In spite of this rationalization of the disappearance of the conspicuous gifts of the Spirit known from the beginnings of Christianity, he yet characterizes his own church as a woman who had fallen from her previous prosperity. Although she still shows the choirs and caskets of the golden ornaments, the truth is, according to Chrysostom, that she has been bereft of them. In his view, the church of his own time only has the symbols of those gifts of the Spirit. As an example, he says that in the worship of his

45 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 29, 3 (PG 61, 244). Most probably the words xei Yios (“and of the Son”) have been omitted erroneously in PG 61, 244, line 11; for the equivalent et Filius occurs in Migne’s Latin translation. See also NPNF I, xii, 170: “the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost”.
46 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 27, 1 (PG 61, 223–224).
47 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 36, 5 (PG 61, 313); translation J.L. Kovacs.
49 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 29, 1 (PG 61, 239). This description of the early church was also inspired by passages such as Acts 9:36–43; 10:44–48; 13:1; 14:8–10; 19:13–17; 20:9–12 etc.
50 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 26, 1; 26, 3 (PG 61, 213; 216–217); see Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17; 219.
52 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 29, 1; 35, 3 (PG 61, 241; 245).
53 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 36, 4 (PG 61, 311).
54 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 36, 3 (PG 61, 310).
55 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 36, 4 (PG 61, 312).
56 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 29, 1 (PG 61, 239).
57 1 Cor. 13:7.
58 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 34, 1 (PG 61, 287).
59 1 Cor. 13:7.
60 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 33, 5 (PG 61, 283).
own time also two or three speak in turn, and when one is silent, another begins. He quotes the response of the people “and with your spirit,” which shows, in his view, that of old they used to say nothing inspired not by their own wisdom but by the Spirit. However, such liturgical elements are only “signs and reminders” of what happened in the worship of the first Christians in Corinth. Another reference to the liturgical practice of Chrysostom’s time is found in his comment on the Corinthians’ habit of speaking in tongues without interpretation. Paul said that someone who does not understand a thanksgiving spoken in tongues cannot confirm it by saying “Amen.” Chrysostom explains that the layman does not hear the final words “forever and ever” (εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων), and thus cannot say “Amen” at the proper moment. He reminds his audience that in Paul’s time they all came together and sang psalms, “of one heart and soul;” Chrysostom admits that in his time they still do so, but says that what lacks is unanimity, and that instead of peace there is war everywhere. In a moving passage he gives a very critical characterization of the worship of his own church in these words:

Formerly, private houses were churches; but now the church is like a private house, or, rather, it is worse than any house. At least in other houses one can find things all in order, since both the lady of the house is seated on her chair with all elegance, and the female slaves weave quietly, and each of the male slaves has his appointed task at hand. But in the church there is great commotion and confusion, no different from a tavern. There is such laughing and uproar, people shout as if they were in a bathhouse or a marketplace, and everyone makes a racket. And these things happen here only: since elsewhere it is not even permitted to address one’s neighbour in the church, not even if one sees again a friend who was absent for a long time, but these things are done outside, and very decently. The church is not a barbershop, or a perfumery store, or a workshop in the marketplace. It is a place of angels and archangels, God’s kingdom, heaven itself. If someone who had left heaven would have taken you there, even if you saw your father or your brother, you would not dare to speak; thus neither here you should utter anything else, except for the spiritual words. For even the things of this place are heaven. If you do not believe me, just look at this table and remember for whose sake it is standing here and for what reason. Consider

who comes forth to this place, and feel a thrill of anticipation. Indeed, when someone sees the throne of a king, his spirits are raised as he awaits the king’s coming. The same applies to you: do not wait until that awesome day to tremble; rise up. Even before you see the curtains removed and the chorus of angels advancing, ascend to heaven itself. (…) For the church is not a place for conversation but for teaching. (…) There must always be one voice in the church since it is one body. For this reason only the reader speaks, and while he does so, even the bishop sits in silence. Only the chanter chants. If all join in, the voices come as if from a single mouth. And only the preacher is to preach. But when everyone is conversing about things many and sundry, why should we preachers vex you to no purpose?

In this interesting passage Chrysostom presents the church building as heaven and as God’s kingdom. Angels and archangels are present there, and when he alludes to the one who comes forth to the table, he means Christ who comes to the altar. When the curtains before the altar are removed, the faithful are allowed a look into heaven where the angels are advancing. The faithful are exhorted to ascend spiritually to heaven. Chrysostom applies Paul’s prescriptions about one person speaking at a time to the order of the liturgy, in which one person reads the scriptures or sings or delvers the homily, while others are to keep silent—although in practice this apparently was not the case, if we may believe him and if he does not exaggerate.

He understands the admonition that women have to be silent in the church in the context of the noise and commotion in the Antiochian church, for he interprets it with regard to women in Paul’s time who were chatting during the meeting: they were not even allowed to ask a question in the church, but had to ask their husbands at home. For Chrysostom this also applies to the women in Antioch.

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64 Cf. 1 Cor. 14:27, 29–30.
65 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 36, 4–5 (PG 61, 331-332).
66 1 Cor. 14:36.
67 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 35, 3 (PG 61, 300), phrase: e.g. Gal. 15, Heb. 13:21.
68 Acts 4:32.
69 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 36, 5 (PG 61, 333).
70 Cf. a Cor. 14:22.
71 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 36, 5–6 (PG 61, 333–335); for the translation, see Kvačec, 1 Corinthians Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators, 203–239, and NPNF I, xi, 220–221.
72 Cf. his Homiliae in Epistolam ad Ephesios 3, 5 (PG 62, 29), concerning the eucharistic sacrifice: “when thou hearest the words ‘Let us pray together,’ when thou beholdest the curtains (φράγματα) drawn up, then imagine that the heavens are let down from above, and that the Angels are descending” (translation NPNF I, xii, 64).
74 Homiliae in Epistolam primam ad Corinthios 37, 1 (PG 61, 315-316).
Assessment

As a matter of fact, these patristic comments on 1 Corinthians 11–14 only give a limited insight into the extent to which Christian worship in Rome and Antioch in the second half of the fourth century differed from the beginnings in Corinth. Yet Ambrosiaster's and Chrysostom's commentaries do give us interesting impressions of the ways in which these two authors looked back on the early Corinthian worship and appropriated Paul's admonitions to their own contexts.

Ambrosiaster's rhetorical and hermeneutical strategy is to minimize the differences, since he applies Paul's text as directly as possible to the church of his own time. He compares speaking in tongues with using the Greek language in a Latin-speaking church, a habit of which he disapproves. To prophesy means to interpret the scriptures or to proclaim the coming of the Lord as it is professed in the creed. The mystery of the eucharist is a spiritual medicine and definitely not a meal. Ambrosiaster pretends that in Christian worship nothing is hidden or veiled. He compares the charismatic worship of the Corinthians with the intergenerational study of the scriptures as was done in his church, following the tradition of the synagogue. In Ambrosiaster's view women are excluded from such Bible study, although contemporaneous sources testify to learned women who studied the Bible together, and even to women who taught the interpretation of the scriptures to men. However, we may assume that such meetings were not part of the common eucharistic worship. Ambrosiaster's casual references to the creed said after prayer, to the oblation of the eucharist and to the preference for saying or singing certain liturgical elements in Greek all suggest a rather organized liturgy.

This is also true for John Chrysostom's comments, but in a different way. He describes the church building as heaven and as God's kingdom, where angels are present and where people can spiritually ascend to heaven. In his church, the altar is hidden behind curtains, but these are removed during the celebration of the eucharist. His remarks about the reader, the chanter and the preacher and about liturgical formulations such as "and with your spirit," and "forever and ever" responded by "Amen," testify to an elaborated liturgy. However, to a lesser extent than Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom is inclined to pass over the differences between the early Corinthian worship and the liturgy of his own time, and he regrets that the manifestations of the Spirit described by Paul have been lost in his own time. Yet he strongly recommends the spiritual strength of the worship of his own church, although at the same time he feels compelled to criticize the Antiochians who do not sufficiently pay attention to it since they chat and laugh while the service is going on. Whereas Ambrosiaster simply accepts the developments in the shape of Christian worship since Paul, and mostly selects from 1 Corinthians 11–14 what he can apply to his own situation, John Chrysostom more acutely deals with the differences between the past and his own time. Both authors agree, however, that in the beginning the conspicuous gifts of the Spirit were manifested in order to convince the unbelievers of the truth of the Christian faith, which in their own time had been widely established, so that the Christians could now convince others by means of their love, good works, and plain preaching.