

How To Have A Church Meeting

The New Testament Way

How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, everyone of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two or at the most by three, and that by course, and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak to himself, and to God.

Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for a woman to speak in the church. What! Came the word of God out from you? Or came it to you only?

If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant.

Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently, and in order.

1 Co 14:26-40 (KJV)

The Modern Way

How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, the pastor hath a doctrine, and the minister of music hath psalms. Let all things be done unto edifying.

If anyone besides the pastor hath a doctrine, let him not speak; let him hold his peace. Let him sit in the pew, and face the back of the neck of the person which sitteth ahead of him.

Let the people keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith church tradition. But if they will learn anything, let them ask their pastor after the service, for it is a shame for a layman to speak in the church. For the pastor, he hath a seminary degree, and the layman, he hath not so lofty a degree.

If any man desire to remain a church member in good standing, let him acknowledge that what I write to you is the command of the denominational headquarters. But if any man ignore this, he shall be promptly escorted out the door by the ushers.

Wherefore brothers, covet not to speak in the church. Let all things be done decently and in the order in which it hath been written in the church bulletin.

- R.E.

"When You Come Together"

- 1 Co 14:26

Not many people are aware of it, but the Bible does tell us how to conduct a church meeting! Not only that, but through lack of understanding, ignorance, or just plain apathy, most churches do not obey these biblical instructions. They are found in 1 Co 14:26-40. 1 Co 14:26 begins with "What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation."

There is a very important word in 14:26 that is usually ignored. It is the word "everyone." The text does not say, "When you come together, the minister of music has a song, and the pastor has a word of instruction." Instead, it tells us that "everyone" comes with the potential to contribute something. Since this is the case, shouldn't we give everyone the opportunity to do so? This verse makes it startlingly clear that God does not intend for pastors to be the only people who are allowed to bring a word of instruction during church, or ministers of music the only ones who introduce songs to sing! As the apostle Paul wrote in Col 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." "Speak to one another," Paul also wrote in Eph 5:19-20, "with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the above verses, notice the emphasis on teaching "one another", and singing to "one another."

Returning to 1 Co 14:26, note that the apostle wrote "When you come together, each one has a . . . word of instruction . . ." There is an abundance of wisdom in everything that the Lord has ordained, and this is no exception. When a church leader seldom allows anyone other than himself to teach, his church will suffer in several different ways. Since it is impossible for one man to meet the teaching needs of everyone in his congregation, many will go spiritually hungry. And since this church leader will seldom receive teaching from others, he will go spiritually hungry. Is there a church leader on earth who is so mature that he does not need to hear the teaching of others in church?

"But, brother," I can imagine someone objecting, "we allow others with the gift of teaching to teach in Sunday School, not in church." That's good—at least the members of your church have some outlet for teaching one another—but it's not good enough. Paul could not have been talking about Sunday School meetings in this passage; Sunday School did not even exist in Paul's time! He was talking about church meetings. In fact, Paul used the word "church" seven times in this chapter, and 14:23 makes it very clear that Paul was writing about when the "whole church comes together"!

Six Guidelines for Church Meetings

In 14:26, Paul gives us examples of various contributions each believer may make to the meeting. In the verses that follow, he tells us how to incorporate them into the meeting. Notice that the apostle does not give us an "order of worship." Instead, he gives us principles and guidelines to follow which infuse freedom, spontaneity, and creativity into church meetings! Several guidelines can be gleaned from 14:26-36.

Guideline One

The first guideline, in the last half of 14:26, is that "All of these songs, teachings, etc. must be done

for the strengthening of the church." Whatever is spoken in the meeting must edify, or strengthen, the church. Usually this entails speaking a positive and uplifting word, but a church may also be edified by a challenging word that produces sorrow and repentance.

Guideline Two

The second guideline is "If anyone speaks in a tongue, two-or at the most three-should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God" (14:27). Unfortunately, because tongues is one of the more spectacular gifts, in modern times we have just as great a tendency to get off balance with it as the Corinthians did in their day. Paul's instructions are often ignored in several different ways. In some churches people speak publicly in tongues without an interpreter. In others, nearly everyone speaks publicly in tongues at once. Needless to say, this causes outsiders to think the church members are mentally unbalanced (1 Co 14:23)!

At the other extreme, in many churches speaking in tongues is not permitted at all, despite the fact that Paul makes allowance for it here, and despite the instruction he gave later in 14:39: "do not forbid speaking in tongues." Why would the Lord have given us this gift if he did not want us to use it? This is not to say that every church will have the gift of tongues, but all churches should be open to its exercise according to Scripture.

Guideline Three

A third guideline is that "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said" (14:29). A prophecy, according to W.E. Vine's *Expository Dictionary*, is "the speaking forth of the mind and counsel of God." Thus prophecy is not limited to "foretelling;" it is more completely described as "forth telling." Vine describes a prophet as having three primary characteristics: 1) the Spirit of God rests on him, 2) he converses with God, and 3) he is one from whom a message from God springs forth or is secretly disclosed.

The above verse should not be considered as a command that two or three prophets *must* speak, but rather as a command to *allow* two or three prophets to speak. Prophecy should not be forbidden, but we should "weigh carefully what is said" (14:29). Even when "thus saith the Lord" is attached to a message, we should not accept it unquestionably. God expects us to discern His Word from that which is not His, because false teaching and false prophecy are a real possibility. As 1 Th 5:19-21 tells us, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good."

Since the offices of teacher and prophet are treated as separate ministries in Eph 4:11, we should not consider teaching and prophecy to be the same thing. Teaching is usually based on learning and preparation; but prophecy is based on revelations of the Spirit. There is some overlap between the two, however, because 1 Co 14:31 tells us that instruction is one of the goals of prophecy. In fact, many of the spiritual gifts can overlap. A song, for instance, could teach doctrine, and an interpretation of a message in tongues could take the form of a prophecy. Likewise, a prophecy could take the form of a teaching. A good example of this is the prophecy given by King Lemuel's mother to her son in Pr 31:1-31. Verse 1 refers to the passage as an oracle (lit., "burden," a term often used in the OT to indicate a weighty message given by God), but it is written simply in the form of a mother teaching her son.

Peter wrote that "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully

administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Pe 4:10-11). Every word that is spoken in a church meeting should be prompted by the Spirit of God and delivered in a manner befitting such an utterance. Note also that we are commanded to use whatever spiritual gift God has given us "to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace" (4:10). Spiritual gifts are not so much gifts to us as they are gifts to the body of Christ. Because of this, it would be wrong for us not to serve others with our gifts! The beauty of a scriptural church meeting is that it gives us more opportunities to do this.

Guideline Four

In 1 Co 14:30 we read the fourth guideline: "and if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop." There are several observations that we can draw from this verse. The first is that most church meetings should be more participatory than they are. Unfortunately, in many of our modern churches, if someone attempts to follow the spirit of this verse by saying, "I'd like to add something to that", he would be promptly escorted out the door by the deacons. God never meant that there should not be spontaneity in our meetings. Preparation is good, but no meeting should ever be planned so that we do not permit the Holy Spirit to surprise us. We must allow Him room to lead sovereignly. Spontaneity and the freedom for anyone to speak add an air of excitement and expectancy to worship. The Lord never intended that church meetings be a boring experience!

The word that is translated "revelation" (14:30) means "an unveiling of secrets given by the Spirit." There are several forms that a revelation may take. One way is that the Spirit may give a sudden understanding of a Bible passage or a scriptural principle to someone in a church meeting, who then shares it to complement a message that is being spoken.

Following this, Paul makes a corollary statement: "For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged" (14:31). The principle evident here is that one person's gift cannot meet the needs of everyone. If we want everyone to be instructed and encouraged, then everyone must be allowed to participate in his proper turn.

If someone speaks out of turn, however, then those who are more spiritually mature have the responsibility to ask him to be quiet, and to restore order as quickly and discreetly as possible. Talking out of turn is speaking when the Holy Spirit has not led, and includes being disruptive, domineering, disorderly, long winded, or teaching falsehoods. Related to this, the apostle next teaches us that God gives no one an uncontrollable urge to speak: "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets" (14:32). If a person disturbs an otherwise orderly church meeting, claiming he cannot help himself, then the urge to do so does not come from God. As Paul continues in v 33, "For God is not a God of disorder but of peace."

Guideline Five

A fifth guideline for meetings is based on 14:33b-35, "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be submissive, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church." An entire chapter could easily be devoted to explaining (or explaining away) this fifth guideline (see chapter entitled "Women Should Remain Silent")! For now, suffice it to say that unless open, participatory meetings were the norm, these instructions for women would have been meaningless. Obviously, people were asking

questions of the various speakers in the meeting.

Guideline Six

The last guideline for church gatherings overarches all else: "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (14:40). Spontaneity in church is no excuse for disorder! However, neither is doing things in a "fitting and orderly way" an excuse for following a preprinted church bulletin. On the contrary, such schedules effectively serve to squelch the Holy Spirit. The tenor of 1 Co 14 suggests that God's norm for church meetings is that nothing be pre-planned. "Orderly" (14:40) spontaneity is to be the standard.

Notice also the complete lack of emphasis on church leaders in 1 Co 14. They simply did not dominate nor moderate the meeting. Certainly the leaders spoke up if a violation of the order of 1 Co 14 occurred, but otherwise they just blended into the woodwork. Did you catch the cavalier way Paul just tossed a "word of instruction" in with all the other elements of the meeting (1 Co 14:26)? Preaching did not dominate New Testament assemblies. That "everyone" could potentially teach at any given meeting suggests that not even the teaching was pre-scheduled. Certainly those inclined to teach would prepare ahead of time, but that is not the same as being slated to teach in advance. Such rigidity simply is not "fitting" (14:40)!

Conclusion

It is obvious from Scripture that church meetings should be participatory, and that everyone should be allowed to contribute freely and spontaneously to them. Since this is so different from the way that churches normally hold meetings today, many will undoubtedly find 1 Co 14:26-40 tempting to ignore.

But God does not give us that option! Instead, the apostle Paul tells us that what he is writing is "the Lord's command." "Did the Word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached? If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored" (14:36).

Paul anticipates that there would be those who would want to conduct church meetings in ways other than this. His questions are designed to point out to them how presumptuous they would be to ignore his instructions and invent their own customs-as though the Word of God had originated with them, or they had a corner on it!

We know for a fact, however, that there have been those in the history of the church who have presumed to substitute their customs for the Word of God, since the way of meeting we have inherited is so different from what the Lord commanded. Tertullian, a second century believer, wrote that "custom without truth is error grown old." Why should we continue to ignore the commands of God for the sake of "error grown old"? If we disregard the apostles' words, won't what Jesus spoke to the pharisees also ring true of us?-"And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" (Mt 15:3). Let's abandon such traditions! Anyone who claims to be spiritual, and yet ignores this, will be ignored by God or others, Paul indicates. This is fitting, for if we ignore God, don't we deserve to be ignored?

As you implement the apostle Paul's instructions in your own church, God will be more pleased with your obedience than with the sweat and toil used to prepare for a thousand church meetings not conducted according to His Word. As the prophet Samuel said to King Saul, "to obey is better than

sacrifice" (1 Sa 15:22).

- R.E.

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