

How to Have a New Testament Church Meeting

By Rusty Entrekin

The Corinthians practiced what are called participatory, open, or interactive meetings. Should we imitate them in this regard?

Did you know that the Bible gives us guidelines on how to have a church meeting? These instructions 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.”

In this verse, the apostle Paul was describing what normal church life was like for the Corinthians. It may come as a shock to us to realize he did not say, “When you come together, the minister of music has a song, and the pastor has a word of instruction.”

Instead, “everyone” of the brethren at Corinth came ready to contribute something. Some might think that the Apostle was criticizing the Corinthians for this. Perhaps there was some mild criticism intended, for as we read on, the apostle provides guidelines regarding who can speak, how often, and when. He restricted the number of those who could publicly speak in tongues and prophesy in a given meeting, and corrected the behavior of some of the women. But if there was any criticism intended in verse 26, it was quite limited. Paul did not go on to restrict the right to speak to only a few men. He did not say, "Brethren, this ought not to be. Only the pastor and the minister of music should speak." Instead, he assumed the right of any of the brethren to speak in the meeting, and simply provided guidelines for doing so. Thus, his intent was merely to provide some course corrections, not to cancel the entire flight!

This verse makes it startlingly clear that at Corinth, the right to publicly bring a teaching to the entire church was not the exclusive right of one paid professional. Pastors were not the only people who were allowed to bring a word of instruction during church, and ministers of music (had they existed back then) were not the only ones who introduced songs to sing!

In Col 3:16, we learn that things were apparently like that at Colosse, too:

- “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.”

Reading this, it becomes painfully apparent that the way most of us have church today was not "normal" in New Testament times. Back then, church meetings were a time when the everyday, non-professional

Christian contributed to the meetings. The right to teach in church was not the exclusive domain of the paid professional.

I see advantages in the way that the early Christians practiced church.

We often talk about the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer nowadays. But back then, they not only talked about it, they actually *lived it out* in how they practiced their church meetings.

It is tough for one man to meet the teaching needs of everyone in his congregation alone. Back then, more than one person taught in the meetings, so that was not a concern. And since church leaders got to hear teaching from others, it was less likely that *they* had unmet spiritual needs. Is there a church leader on earth who is so mature that he cannot benefit from the teaching of others in his church? I doubt it.

"But, brother," I can imagine someone objecting, "we allow others with the gift of teaching to teach in Sunday School, not in church." Well, at least the members of your church have *some* outlet for teaching one another, and that's good. There were also opportunities to teach outside of church meetings in NT times. Something distantly kin to Sunday School, classes for new converts, arrived on the scene rather early. Paul held discussions daily in the Lecture Hall of Tyrannus, and others surely did similar things now and then. But Paul could not have been speaking of one of these ancient predecessors to Sunday School, because 14:23 makes it very clear that he was writing about when the "whole church comes together!" And we *know* that Sunday school, invented less than 250 years ago, could not have been what He had in mind! No doubt, Paul was talking about church meetings, for he used the word "church" *seven times* in this chapter!

And so we cannot avoid the conclusion that any man with the spiritual maturity to teach was welcome to bring a message in an early church meeting. In fact, since Paul does not limit the number of teachers who may speak, it probably often happened that more than one man would teach in a given meeting!

No doubt, church meetings were different back then. But were they better, or healthier? I think that they were, at least after Paul got the Corinthians straightened out with these instructions. Otherwise, in the verses that follow verse 26, Paul would have steered the Corinthians more toward our modern way of doing things. But he didn't!

Even more significantly, this epistle was addressed not only to the Corinthians, but to "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord". That would include us! Therefore, we cannot dismiss what Paul wrote in this passage with a wave of the hand, thinking, "This applied only to the Corinthians. It doesn't apply to me."

With these things in mind, let's go on to read these instructions that Paul wrote not only to the Corinthians, but to us as well.

Six Guidelines for Church Meetings

In 14:26, Paul gave examples of various contributions each believer may make to the meeting: "a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation." In the verses that follow (27-40), he tells us how to incorporate these contributions 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! Let's consider these guidelines.

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 ultimately 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.” This is not to say that every church will have the gift of tongues, but according to verse 39, all churches should be open to its exercise according to Scripture. In fact, I know of a church composed mostly of cessationists (people who believe that the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy have ceased). Humbly recognizing that their belief in cessationism could be wrong, they say that they would permit a message in tongues to be spoken in their fellowship, out of fear of violating this clear command of 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, we would be harming the body of Christ if we denied others the opportunity to minister with their gifts! The beauty of a scriptural church meeting is that it gives God's people 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.

First of all, we should recognize that the apostle is speaking of prophecy here, not of teaching. Some have misunderstood this verse, and taken it to mean that it is OK to rudely interrupt a teacher while He is delivering a word of instruction. Some have even taken it to mean that it is OK to change the course of a teaching altogether, or to interrupt with an entirely unrelated teaching! That would be very unedifying, and is not at all what the apostle meant here.

This does not mean that we cannot add some insightful comments to a teaching when appropriate, but when it is done, it should be done in respectful and edifying way. Avoid interrupting the Holy Spirit's flow during a teaching. You may want to wait until a teacher asks questions, or invites others to comment on the scripture passage he is teaching from. Or you may raise your hand and wait to be acknowledged, or wait for an appropriate pause in the teaching. The word that is translated "revelation" (14:30) means "an unveiling of secrets given by the Spirit." Granted, one form that a revelation may take is when the Spirit gives 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. However, since Paul limits the number of prophets who speak to two or three, we must not besiege a teacher with so many revelations to compliment his message that the poor man cannot get through it. That would also be very unedifying.

Here, however, the apostle is not speaking of adding something to a teaching, but of how the Holy Spirit may move one prophet to speak, and then another. When the Holy Spirit desires a second prophet to speak, He is finished speaking, or almost finished speaking, through the first prophet for the time being, who should stop and give the second a chance to speak as soon as it is appropriate.

Note, also, that our Lord does not want one prophet to dominate the meeting. Other prophets, if there are any, should be given opportunity to speak.

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 prophets are to speak "in turn." One prophet must not interrupt another prophet so that two people are speaking at the same time. One rule that the apostle has made clear in this passage is that only one person should speak at a time. So even in the case of prophets, everything should be done in an orderly way. This obviously means that the second prophet should indicate to the first that he also has something to say, preferably by raising his hand or by some other silent signal.

Another 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. This principle of mutual participation means that there should be spontaneity in our meetings. No church meeting should ever be so planned that we do not permit the Holy Spirit to surprise us. We must allow Him room to sovereignly lead! 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!

However, our Lord did intend that church meetings be orderly. If someone speaks out of turn, then those who are spiritually mature should seek 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 and edifying church meeting, 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.”

A home meeting in New Testament times. Since the meetings were interactive and took place in homes, participants probably sat in a circle instead of rows.