

The Meeting of the New Testament Church

John Stevenson

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Table of Contents

THE PATTERN OF THE MEETING.....	2
THE PLACE OF TONGUES IN THE CHURCH.....	3
THE PLACE OF PROPHECY IN THE CHURCH.....	5
THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH.....	6
THE RECOGNITION OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY.....	11

The church service was over and the people were milling around. A father and his small son were standing at the back of the church where there was a bronze plaque mounted on the wall containing a military emblem and the names of a number of men. The boy asked his father what these names were and his father replied that these were the names of the people who had died in the service. Whereupon the little boy asked, "Which service, morning or evening?"

There are a lot of churches that have a serious problem. They go through all of the formal rituals and they preach nice sermons and they sing nice songs, but they are dead. What are the reasons for this? How can a church be dead?

In His message to the seven churches, Jesus addressed one in particular that He said was dead.

...I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. (Revelation 3:1b).

The church at Sardis was suffering from dry rot. Do you know what that is? It is a form

of rot that affects the inside of a tree. Because it rots from the inside out, you can look at the outside and it appears to be completely healthy. The church at Sardis was like that. It looked like it was alive. It did all of the things that we normally associate with a living church.

- They had regular church meetings
- They prayed together
- They collected an offering
- They sang hymns
- They listened to the preaching of a sermon

They had a reputation for being alive. They did all of the things that a church is thought to do. But these things do not guarantee a living church. It is like a stuffed animal. It may look very nice, but it is dead. There is no life in it.

Sardis was a dead church. But Jesus did not say that all hope ought to be abandoned or that the people of Sardis ought to leave their church and go and join themselves to a different church. Instead, He gives a remedy for the situation at Sardis.

Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. (Revelation 3:2).

The problem in Sardis was not that they had begun to do none of the things they were supposed to do. The problem is that they had left the job unfinished. There were deeds that were incomplete. Because of this, there is a call to action.

As Paul writes to the believers at Corinth, he gives them a similar call to action.

THE PATTERN OF THE MEETING

What is the outcome then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Most of us today are used to a meeting in which a song leader gets up and leads everyone in the music of the church, then a prayer leader gets up and leads everyone in the prayer of the church and, finally, the preacher gets up and does all of the rest of the talking in the church.

In such a church service, the role of the people is very limited. It is a passive involvement. It is usually to sit and to listen and to try not to fall asleep. While I do believe that the early church had each of these elements, it also seems to have had an

additional element that is largely missing in many churches today. What is this missing ingredient? It is CORPORATE INVOLVEMENT.

Paul describes this sort involvement: *When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.*

Notice who was involved in the meeting of the New Testament church. It was not just the elders or the deacons. It was not just the seminary graduates. It was not just the ordained ministers. The meeting of the church was made up of the various members of the church you found ways and means to minister during the church during the corporate meeting. There was a plurality of involvement.

The members of the church enjoyed the exercise of their spiritual gifts in the meeting of the church. This was the place where they came to use their spiritual gifts. The result was that the entire body was edified.

Paul does not say that he wants the believers to stop doing this. Instead, he wants them to regulate it.

- They are to speak one at a time
- They are to take turns speaking
- Only three of each gift is to speak

I believe that it will be a great blessing to the church to return to this sort of corporate life. I am not saying that it needs to become a disorganized mob. This was the problem with which Paul dealt in Corinth. But we have a tendency to go to the other extreme. We tend to be so regulated that we have regulated the use of spiritual gifts right out of the church. This can be as unhealthy as the mob scene that characterized the church at Corinth.

THE PLACE OF TONGUES IN THE CHURCH

If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three, and each in turn, and let one interpret; 28 but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God. (1 Corinthians 14:27-28).

Paul has already dealt at length with the subject of the speaking of various languages within the church. The church at Corinth was multi-lingual in nature. This resulted in a number of different languages ("tongues") being spoken within the church. To make things even more difficult, there were some Corinthian Christians who were speaking in foreign languages that no one else could understand. Were these unknown tongues languages that they had learned to speak in the past? Or was this a supernatural manifestation at work? Paul does not say. What he does do is to give three regulations

that will be applied to any speaking of languages within the church.

- First, the multi-lingual speaking is to be limited to two or three instances per meeting: *If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three (14:27).*
- Secondly, they are to take turns in such speaking: *Each in turn (14:27).*
- Thirdly, there must be an interpretation of what is spoken so that all who are present can understand: *Let one interpret; 28 but if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God (14:27-28).*

I have a feeling that the great deal of the modern-day tongues phenomenon would disappear entirely if these three regulations were followed.

1. A Limitation of Speaking: *If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two or at the most three (14:27).*

The fact that these instances of tongue-speaking was to be regulated to a maximum of two or three tells me something about this phenomenon. It tells me that these tongues were not an irresistible force that suddenly came over someone so that he had no control over it. If that had been the case, then Paul would have had no business telling the Corinthians to regulate their tongues-speaking.

2. An Orderly Allowance: *Each in turn (14:27).*

There was to be an orderly allowance as each person who was going to speak took his turn. This would necessarily mean that, after one person had spoken in tongues, he or she was to wait, perhaps for weeks or even for months until everyone else had opportunity to do so before taking another turn.

3. A Required Interpretation: *Let one interpret (14:27).*

If all things in the church are to be done for edification, then it will be necessary for everyone who is present to understand what is said.

There is an application of this truth that needs to be mentioned. Our teaching in the church ought to be on a level that everyone can understand and at which everyone will be edified. This means we need to be careful to explain our terms when we use theological words.

4. An Alternative of Silence: *But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church; and let him speak to himself and to God (14:28).*

There have been a number of occasions where I have had opportunity to attend church services in other countries. In many of those situations, the music and the prayers and the praise and the preaching were all done in languages I could neither speak or understand. Those times where I was the most edified were those times when an interpreter was present.

On a number of those occasions, I was invited to speak and to share a word with the congregation. Each time I assented to speak, there was an interpretation made of my words into the language of the people who were present. If there was no interpreter present, then I did not speak.

If you were in the church at Corinth and your native language was Parthian, you were not to pray aloud in Parthian unless there was someone present to interpret. Likewise, if you were to receive a supernatural ability to pray in Parthian, you were not to use that ability unless someone else was able to interpret, either naturally or through a corresponding supernatural ability of interpretation.

This did not mean you could not pray. It only meant that you were not to pray aloud. You could still pray to yourself and to God.

This tells me something about public prayer. It is directed to God, but it is also intended to edify those who hear. I am to receive a blessing when I hear someone else pray.

THE PLACE OF PROPHECY IN THE CHURCH

29 And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment. 30 But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let the first keep silent.

31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; 32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; 33 for God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. (1 Corinthians 14:29-33).

Just as the speaking in tongues is to be regulated within the meeting of the church, so also the ministry of the prophet is also to be regulated.

1. A Numerical Limitation: *And let two or three prophets speak, and let the others pass judgment (14:29).*

The preaching and teaching and exhorting and encouraging within the meeting of the church was never designed to be only by one man. Paul is very specific. He allows for a plurality among those who preach and prophesy within the meeting of the church.

There is a reason for this. It is so that there can be a system of checks and balances within the meeting of the church.

2. An Orderly Submission: *But if a revelation is made to another who is seated, let*

the first keep silent 31 For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted; 32 and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets (14:30-31).

If a prophet is standing and speaking in the church and another is given a revelation, when it becomes his turn to speak, the first is to remain silent. One person is not to be interrupting another, but instead, all are to act in a polite and orderly manner.

At this point, you might be scratching your head and saying to yourself, "I have been going to church for a long time and I have never seen such a service." The sort of service that Paul describes is not very popular. We like to have the music director lead everyone in a few songs and then the preacher give his sermon and we like to sit and to listen (more or less) because that means we do not have to do too much. Yet Paul's description of the church is one that sees all of the members actively involved.

Christian worship was never meant to be a spectator sport. You know all about spectator sports. It is what happens during football season when 22 men who desperately need rest are watched by 50,000 fans who desperately need exercise.

If there is a word that is to describe Christianity, it is INVOLVEMENT. We are members of a body. The quickest way to kill a body is to have some of the key organs shut down and stop working.

3. A Peaceful Representation: *For God is not a God of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints (14:33).*

This is the key to everything Paul has been saying. He has not been speaking against the use of tongues, but has only been insisting that it be done in an orderly manner. He does not say that a plurality of people should be forbidden from speaking in the meeting of the church; he has only insisted that they take their turn in an orderly manner.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says. 35 And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. (1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

Paul now moves to another issue among those who were speaking in the meeting of the church. It is the subject of the role of women in the church. This is as much of an issue today as it was in Paul's day. Should women be ordained as elders within the church? Should women be permitted to speak from the pulpit? Can a woman serve as the pastor of a church?

1. The Prohibition for Women to Speak: *Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak. (14:34).*

Before I comment on what this passage does say, I first want to focus on what it does not say. I've recently heard a new proposed interpretation of this passage that claims that instead of these verses being an injunction by Paul toward women, he is merely quoting and rebuking the mistaken practice of the Corinthians toward women. This retranslation of the passage would say something like: *"You Corinthians have been telling your women to keep silent in the churches and that they are not permitted to speak, but you only let them subject themselves and you use the Law as an excuse and if they desire to learn anything, you only let them ask their own husbands at home; for you think it is improper for a woman to speak in church."*

What shall we say to such an interpretation? It is true that no ancient Greek text uses quotation marks, but this did not come as a shock or a hindrance to those Greek writers. When they wanted to indicate that a quote was being made, they merely included the words, "He said" or "They are saying." There ARE places in the New Testament where a series of false statements are quoted in this manner. But in every one of those instances, the passage itself makes it very clear in the context that we are to understand that this is a quote. Consider the following:

And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), "Let us do evil that good may come"? Their condemnation is just. (Romans 3:8).

Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:12).

But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" (1 Corinthians 15:35).

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation." (2 Peter 3:3-4).

Each of these passages make it very clear that a quote from those teaching falsehood is to be understood by the inclusion of a qualifying phrase {"Why not say..." or "Each one of you is saying..." or "Someone will say..."}. 1 Corinthians 14:34 contains no such qualifying phrase and no indication from the context that we are to understand that a quote is to be understood.

The contextual subject of the passage has been that there is unwarranted speaking going on in the church. Paul has been giving instructions to restrict such promiscuous speaking as the abuse of tongues within the church. As he comes to verse 34, he now approaches some new restrictions. They deal with restrictions toward women speaking in the church.

Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? (1

Corinthians 14:36).

Is verse 36 connected with the previous two verses or with the following verse? Either interpretation is possible.

If it is looking back to the previous two verses, then Paul is giving a rebuke aimed at women who are attempting to take more of a speaking role within the church and who are therefore being disruptive.

If it is connected with verse 37, then Paul is aiming his rebuke to all of the Corinthians who are attempting to "do their own thing" in worship.

In either case, the common point is that people are not free to do as they like within the local church. Paul calls for worship to be conducted in a manner that is both orderly and in keeping with certain guidelines. These are not merely Paul's own personal preferences; they are the commands of the Lord (14:37).

This command is that women are to remain silent in the churches. Why? Why are women to remain silent? Is it because they have nothing worthwhile to say? Is it because they are not as smart as men? No. It is because they are reflecting an attitude of submission.

2. The Principles of Subjection: *But let them subject themselves (14:34).*

Many people have a hard time dealing with these commands, especially when Paul says that women are to subject themselves. But such a command should not surprise us. Christianity is characterized by an attitude of submission.

- We submit to the leadership of the elders in the church (1 Thessalonians 5:12).
- We submit to the leadership of those in government and to the authorities of the land (Romans 13:1-7).
- Slaves were ordered to submit to the authority of their masters (Titus 2:9).
- Children are instructed to obey the authority of their parents (Ephesians 6:1-3).
- Women are to observe the authority of their husbands (Ephesians 5:22).

In each of these cases, there is no mention made about obeying the authority only if it is worthy of obedience. Paul told believers to respect the governmental authorities at a time when the government was burning Christians at the stake. Your responsibility is to obey that authority, whether you agree with it or not.

The only time that disobedience is permitted is when that authority orders you to do something that is wrong. Then and only then do you have the right to disobey that authority in that particular matter. At this point of disobedience, you should also make ready to reap the consequences of your disobedience.

The Precept from the Law: *But let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says (14:34).*

The principles of subordination is not a new idea. It did not come from the Greco-Roman culture in which Paul found himself. It came from the Old Testament Scriptures. It came from the creation account. Paul explains this elsewhere.

Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. ¹² But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. ¹³ For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. ¹⁴ And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression. (1 Timothy 2:11-14).

Notice the reason Paul gives for the subordination of women in the church. It has nothing to do with the culture of his day. It has nothing to do with Paul's own personal prejudice. It has to do with the order of creation and it has to do with the fall.

Let me explain. The reason that a husband has authority over his wife is because God created them to be that way. Even before the fall into sin, there was an order of creation.

At this point, I ought to clear up a common misconception. When the Bible says that woman is subordinate to man, that does not mean she is some type of second-class-Christian and that she has been relegated to some inferior position. Jesus showed us the true meaning of subordination when

He subjected Himself to the will of the Father. Did this render Him into some sort of second-class position? Not at all! To the contrary, by means of His obedience, He has been elevated to being the first over all creation.

In the same way, when a woman follows the role set out for her in the Scriptures, she becomes a picture of the relationship that Christ has with the Father and the relationship the church has with Christ.

Authority	Subordinate	Result
The Father	Jesus Christ	Has been highly exalted
Jesus Christ	The Church	Has been saved
Husband	Wife	Given authority in the home

Many women are tempted to go beyond the Biblical role that God has established because they see men who are not responsible in filling their own roles of leadership. More often than not, this only compounds the problem.

The Provision of her Husband: *And if they desire to learn anything, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is improper for a woman to speak in church. (14:35).*

There apparently was a part of the meeting of the early church where questions could be asked and where answers could be given. Paul's exhortation to the women in the church is that they take their questions to their husbands at home.

There is a phenomenon going around today called the home Bible study. Let me go on record as saying that I think it is a wonderful thing when people come together in an informal setting to study the Bible. But a problem often develops in such settings. The women in these groups get in the habit of taking their questions to the teacher of the study instead of to their husbands. Do you see what has happened in such a case? Such a woman has taken her husband out of the leadership role and has replaced him with a Bible study teacher. This ought not to be. Rather, she needs to recognize her husband as her spiritual leader and go to him with her questions. If he does not know the answers, then he can go out to some other source in search of the proper answers. In this way, he is encouraged to grow and develop as the spiritual leader of his family.

THE RECOGNITION OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

36 Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? 37 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. 38 But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.

39 Therefore, my brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak in tongues. 40 But let all things be done properly and in an orderly manner. (1 Corinthians 14:36-40).

The reason you have women preaching in churches today and the reason you find a misuse of tongues in churches today is because there is a lack of recognition of spiritual authority. We are an independently-minded people. We want to go out and to do our own thing. We resent being told what to do.

A number of years ago, there was a television show called "Candid Camera" that would try to capture people doing funny things. One particular gag involved a wooden fence with a hole in it. Under the hole, they placed a sign that read, "DO NOT LOOK THROUGH THIS HOLE." People who passed by and who did not notice the sign never bothered to look through the hole. But every single person who saw the sign and read it would stop, look both ways to see if anyone was looking, and then would peer through the forbidden hole.

It is in our very nature to disobey. We come by it naturally. Our ancestors were placed into a garden and told they could do anything they wanted except to eat the fruit of one particular tree. What happened? They ate from that tree!

The Corinthians have a similar problem. They have been given a series of instructions, but Paul knows they are going to argue. The reason there will be an argument is because

they resent authority. They are already thinking, "Who does Paul think he is in telling us what to do?" It is for this reason Paul makes the point that his authority comes from God.

1.A Rhetorical Question: *Was it from you that the word of God first went forth? Or has it come to you only? (14:36).*

The question drips with satire. Paul is the one who led most of these people to the Lord. The word of the Lord had come to them through his ministry. It is in this light that he asks them whether they have a monopoly on spirituality.

There is a principle here. It is that you should never be arrogant about your knowledge of spiritual things because you got it from someone else. You might protest, "Wait a minute! I got this particular spiritual truth from the Bible and not from anyone else!" But that only begs the question: From where did you get your Bible?"

We can never be proud or arrogant of our knowledge or of our faith or of our beliefs because everything we have was given to us.

2. A Recognized Challenge: *If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment (14:37).*

Paul issues a challenge. He says, "If you think that you have such great spiritual insights, then use them on the teaching I have given you. If you recognize they are from God, then you have passed your first pop quiz in Prophecy 101.

Do you aspire to the gift of prophet? Do you want to be spiritual? Read the Bible. Then recognize it as the word of God. Then live accordingly.