

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

All Participate. All Submit. In Everything, Order.

(1 Corinthians 14:26-40)

Study #19

Introduction: First principles...

Physicians are to adhere to a first principle to guide their treatment of patients. It's the Hippocratic Oath: *"First, do no harm."*

We could probably identify first principles that guide other professionals.

Financial advisors? *"First, lose no money."* Computer programmers? *"Simple code is elegant code."* Plumbers? *"Don't make the leak worse."* Or *"Water runs downhill."*

Last Sunday, the Apostle Paul gave us a first principle that applies when the church gathers. *Do everything for edification."*

When we come together, we are to do all that we do to build each other up in our faith in Jesus. (1 Corinthians 14:12)

As we continue in our study of 1 Corinthians this morning, Paul identifies other timely and timeless first principles that are to govern our gatherings.

And, while he doesn't describe an "order of service," or prescribe the volume of instruments or the length of the sermon, he does give some specifics.

Last Sunday, we found great help from the first principle that Paul gave to the first-century church in Corinth. I'm confident that what he had to say to them in what we'll see in 1 Corinthians today, will speak to us just as helpfully.

Final Principles of Freedom & Structure in the Church (14:26-35)

Full Participation is the Goal When We Gather (14:26)

When the church puts into practice all that Paul has to say about the church as a "body," here is the result:

[26] What is the outcome then, brothers and sisters? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. All things are to be done for edification.

That verse gives us a glimpse of the gatherings of the first century church we don't often see.

We learn that while there was substance and content, it wasn't simply a preaching service. There was an engaged worship and praise component when the church came together.

When Paul writes, ***"each one"*** he is not picturing everybody coming to church ready to sing a solo or preach a sermon every week.

In fact, that wouldn't be possible unless the church in view was VERY small.¹

¹ This has led some people to believe that the best application of Paul's words here is in the setting of a small group / home fellowship. I think that it is reasonable to suggest that a typical first-century church would be the size of what we would call a large small group, made up of several families. In the early church, as in many

places in the world today, Northwest would be considered a large church. It is small wonder that, historically, the church has grown the fastest and evangelism has been most effective, in small, informal fellowships. That is, either small churches or thriving, connected small groups within larger churches.

It seems to me that Paul was driving at the need for every member of the church “body” to have opportunities for meaningful involvement, as their interests and giftedness allow, when the church gathers.

I suspect that every local expression of Jesus’ body (every church) has its strengths and its weaknesses.

Based on what we have seen so far in Paul’s letter, it looks like the Corinthian church was doing well with this “full participation” thing, but maybe not quite so well with “edification.” They needed some work with that one.

As you and I have been moving through 1 Corinthians, it is only right that we, who are an expression of Jesus’ body, should be thinking about how we might need to strengthen our participation quotient or grow in edification to become the church Jesus redeemed us to be.

These are two “metrics” for evaluating the effectiveness of a church’s gathered times - not just the worship services, but the overall ministries of the church.

We can and should be asking...

- Is what is going on here resulting in Christians being built up in their faith in Jesus?
- Are there plenty of opportunities for involvement?
- Is it clear that everyone who is a part of what’s going on here is valued?

Moving through this long letter has made it clear to me that there are lots of good things going on AND that there is plenty of room for growth, progress, “next steps.”

Here, Paul tells us that the church works best, and more people are edified when ALL take part in what is going on.

But full participation isn’t the whole story when it comes to how a church gathering runs, as we will now see.

Paul writes, again, about the exercise of tongues-speaking.

He says that there are rules for tongues-speaking when the church comes together, and that the beauty of spontaneity is to be balanced with a pursuit of the higher goal of building others up.

The Sometimes Necessity of Silence (14:27-35)

For tongues-speakers (vv. 27-28)

[27] If anyone speaks in a tongue, it must be by two or at the most three, and each one in turn, and one is to interpret, [28] but if there is no interpreter, he is to keep silent in the church; and have him speak to himself and to God.

So, it isn’t clear to me whether the tongues-speaking Paul is addressing was the same thing that happened on the Day of Pentecost, or it was a form of glossolalia. (ecstatic speech) Either way, what is clear is that tongues-speaking was a thing in the first century church. At least it was in the church at Corinth.

(I think it is noteworthy that Paul said nothing about tongues in his letters to the Galatians, or to Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, or to Thessalonica; nor in his letters to Timothy or Titus.)

Tongues-speaking is not a “thing” here at Northwest. That is, in large part, because we take Paul’s words from the first part of 1 Corinthians 14 to mean that we are to elevate prophecy over tongues-speaking when we gather.

But, for those churches that did in those days and that do, today, practice the use of tongues in the public gathering of the church, he gave guidelines.

One, there was to be an upper limit of three tongues-speakers per time of gathering.

Paul didn’t give a reason for the three person limit. We could make guesses as to why he gave that limit. But since he didn’t give a reason, we really don’t know why.

Another guideline was that all tongues-speaking had to be done sequentially ("**each one in turn**"). Numerous tongues-speakers were not allowed to speak in tongues at the same time.

Finally, the tongues-speaker had to arrange beforehand to have his speech interpreted after he spoke. If there was no one present to interpret, he was to remain silent because that unintelligible "tongue" didn't edify anybody if there was no interpretation.

It isn't hard to imagine that many times a Christian went to the church's gathering, ready to speak a message in a foreign tongue, and was fourth in line and was therefore not allowed to speak.

Or he might find that the interpreter he had lined up hadn't shown up, so he was to remain silent.²

This would no doubt have been a sad thing for that Christian. At the same time, being put in a position where he had to be silent would have taught him a valuable lesson.

Specifically, that as enjoyable as it would be to speak (Paul said that the tongues-speaker "**edifies himself**," 1 Corinthians 14:4), edifying the church was more important than the exercise of his gift. So, on that day, he would best serve the church by his silence.³

Then, Paul followed up rules for tongues-speakers with rules for prophets. Even though prophecy was more valuable than tongues-speaking (1 Corinthians 14:5), its practice, too, was to be regulated.

For prophets (vv. 29-32)

An upper limit on the number of prophecies (v. 29a)

[29a] Have two or three prophets speak...

Just as it was for speaking in tongues, Paul set a limit of, at the most, three prophets prophesying per gathering.

Again, no reason is given. We might suspect time as a factor, or the attention span of the listeners, or too much content to assimilate at one sitting. The fact is that we don't know why "**three**."

Passing judgment on the prophet's prophecy (v. 29b)

[29b]...have the others pass judgment.

Each prophecy was to have been evaluated by "**the others**."

Whether "**the others**" refers to the rest of the church, other prophets, Christians with the gift of discernment, or the Elders of the church is not clear from the text.

What is clear is that everyone who speaks in the church has to pass the "sniff test" of truth. Nobody in the church is above evaluation and inspection and review, or as Paul puts it, "**judgment**."

The church was responsible to judge if what the prophet was saying was from God. Was it true? Was it edifying?

I'll pause here to say that it is important that you weigh carefully what I have to say on Sunday mornings.

I welcome your feedback. But whether or not I welcome your feedback, as a listener, you have the freedom and the responsibility to evaluate my teaching and preaching.

If there is something I have said that you don't understand or that you don't agree with or that you believe doesn't agree with the biblical text, you are to come to me and express yourself.

I am not usually deluged with comments about my teaching and preaching, but over the years I have received a good bit of feedback, most all of it very helpful.

Some of the questions and the observations that have come have resulted in my clarifying what I have said and even what I believe.

² We must not think of tongues as an irrepressible urge of the Holy Spirit which must be followed. Paul said, "*Don't do it, unless you are interpreted.*"

³ In that case, his tongues-speaking became something private between himself and God.

Some of the questions I have received have given me the chance to better explain what I meant by what I said.

So, in our church and in any healthy church, Christians listen critically and, as the verse says, ***“pass judgment.”***

The next rules follow.

Common courtesy among prophets (vv. 30-31)

First, and as a matter of common courtesy Paul wrote, ***[30] But if a revelation is made to another who is seated,⁴ then the first one is to keep silent.***

That looks to me to say that even if the first prophet was in the middle of saying something, he should draw his message to a close to let the other prophet speak.⁵

Second, just as it was with tongues-speaking, prophecies and preachings and teachings and exhortations were to be given in sequence. ***[31] For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be exhorted*** - rather than having three different messages all being given at the same time.

Here is the final regulation of the prophets' ministries.

Self-control for the prophets (v. 32)

[32] and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets.

It was not then and it is not now the case that a Christian who arrives at a gathering with a message to share MUST speak that message, even if he had to break the rules Paul has just given.

No.

If the prophet came to church with a message, and he was fourth in line, he was to remain silent, and trust God for an open door to speak at another time.

The church, gathered, is a setting for seeking others' good and for the worship of God. Fulfilling those purposes required that a certain orderliness be observed.

And, in fact, as Paul says - for the first of two times in this passage - orderliness is a reflection of the nature of God Himself.

Parenthetical: God's Nature Calls For PEACE in the Church (v. 33)

[33] for God is not a God of confusion⁶ but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints...

The life of the church - its ministries and its worship - should reflect the character of God, who brings peace and orderliness out of confusion and chaos.

Unregulated worship consisting of excessive tongues-speaking or too many prophecies doesn't edify. Hence, these guidelines.

And then, having regulated the exercise of a couple of gifts and telling those who possessed those gifts how to exercise them and when NOT to exercise them, Paul shifts his focus to another part of the congregation.

He spoke to women.

For women (vv. 33b-35)

[33b] As in all the churches of the saints, [34] the women are to keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but are to subject themselves, just as the Law also says.

⁴ Note that in the Jewish world, the speaker would rise to read Scripture and would then sit to teach / prophecy / preach.

⁵ This could be rendered *“But if to another, something is revealed...”* implying either a revelation from God or that he / she was burdened to say something.

⁶ *“Confusion”* - a strong word in the Greek; indicates great disturbance; insurrection; revolution. (See Luke 21:9, translated there *“alarmed.”*)

[35] 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.

Granted, there is a challenge here.

But let's keep in mind when reading this that Paul had already given challenging instruction in this same section about women. He told them that they were to wear head coverings. (1 Corinthians 11)

A couple of weeks ago, we looked hard at that command and concluded that it was related to God's original design of man and woman. (1 Corinthians 11:8-10)

A woman's head covering (either with long hair or with an external covering of some kind) distinguished her as uniquely female, different from a man, while at worship.⁷

What makes our passage here challenging is that Paul instructed women to not speak when the church gathered.

But his instruction about head coverings applied to those times when a woman either prophesied or prayed at a church gathering, both of which are definitely speaking roles.

So, whatever Paul was saying here (v. 34), he was not saying that a woman absolutely cannot speak when the church gathers.

We do note that Paul claimed Old Testament backing for this instruction. After writing that women were to be silent, he went on to write, **"just as the Law also says."**

There is no Old Testament verse I can point to that says this. But the idea of general male leadership and general female followership in the Old Testament is well supported.

⁷ That was why Paul referred in that section to the creation of **"male and female."** (Genesis 1, 2)

For instance:

- (1), The promise to Abraham passed from father to son.
- (2). Circumcision was for males, signifying participation in the Abrahamic Covenant.
- (3). The priesthood was reserved for men.
- (4). Only males were required to appear before the Lord three times a year at the festivals.
- (5). When a census was taken, it was of males only.⁸

All of this is not at all to say that women were second-class citizens in the Old Testament. Far from it.

Women were given high esteem in Judaism and God mightily used many women in great ways - Deborah, Ruth, Hannah, Esther to name just a few.

I think, though, that it is clear that the Old Testament (the Law) affirmed male leadership.

And that would explain his command that women were to **"subject themselves"** and to **"ask their husbands at home"** if they had questions.

It doesn't explain **"not permitted to speak."**

Why the command to **"keep silent"**? And since women are allowed to pray and to prophecy at public gatherings if their heads are covered, in what context were they to **"keep silent"**?

You won't be surprised to hear that there have been lots of suggestions as to "why" Paul wrote this.

Possible understandings of Paul's "point"

To the charge that women were interrupting the church's gathering with irrelevant questions that would be better dealt with at home, we can simply say that there is zero evidence of that in the text.

⁸ Additionally, vows were binding upon a man who made a vow; not so for a single woman, whose vow could be overridden by her father or for a married woman whose vow could be annulled by her husband. (Numbers 30:1-15)

To the charge that women were talking or gossiping during the gatherings, again there is no evidence for that.

To the charge that the women were teaching false doctrine when they did speak, why didn't Paul simply say that? (And if that were the case, they would have been dealt with in the same way that anyone giving a false prophecy or a false teaching would have been as their words were "**judged**." - v. 29.)

And to the suggestion that these married women⁹ were showing submission to their husbands by "**keeping silent**" and asking their husbands at home, why was it OK for them to prophecy or pray in public? (1 Corinthians 11:5)¹⁰

I'll admit that I don't know which of these options, if any of them, is correct, or if the correct reason for Paul's instruction for women to "**keep silent**" is something that I have never considered.

I'm convinced that the Corinthians who received this letter had a very good idea about what Paul was getting at.

But even though I don't know exactly why he wrote what he did, it is clear to me that the thread prompting his comments about women was the same thread that we've seen as he wrote to tongues-speakers and to prophets.

The bottom line is that various church members would need to exercise self-control on occasion - tongues-speakers, prophets, and married women.

This self-control was expressed by silence (vv. 28, 30, 34) so that the gathering would be characterized by peace. (v. 33)

⁹ There are strong indications that Paul was writing about married women in this passage. (1). When the word or concept of "**submission / subjection**" occurs in the New Testament with reference to a woman, it always refers to a married woman in her relationship to her husband. (See Eph. 5:22; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1, 5). (2). Paul references "**their own husbands**" (v. 35) to whom the woman was to turn if they had questions. (3). The word that Paul used here is very often used to refer to a married woman (Greek *γυναικεσ*)

A thought about submission...

Before we move on, I want to say one more thing about submission, about being "**subject**."

The Bible is just as clear that a wife is to submit to her husband (put all of her resources at the disposal of her husband to bless him) as it is that a husband is to sacrificially love his wife as Christ loved the church (put all of his resources at the disposal of his wife to bless her).

Paul never says, "*Husbands, make sure that your wife is in subjection.*"¹¹

Nowhere in the New Testament do we ever find a hint of that kind of language. Here in 1 Corinthians, Paul calls on the women in the church to "**subject themselves**" in the context of a church gathering.

He is calling for a woman's voluntary subjection. That is the first thing I want to be sure we notice.

The second thought I wanted to bring to you comes from some personal reflection.

I have wondered if the Bible's commands to a woman to "**subject herself**" at worship and for a wife to be submissive to her husband gives her an advantage in knowing something about submission to God that others (like men...), of necessity, will have a harder time learning.

I have wondered if we ignore submission out of a nervous sense that we might appear chauvinistic or insensitive, we rob a woman of a path to spiritual growth that she has been uniquely given by God to travel.

¹⁰ None of these suggestions explain why Paul silenced women and not men, when presumably there were well-educated, courteous, orthodox women present and at least a few uneducated, less than polite, or doctrinally aberrant men.

¹¹ This is a fine example of how important fine grammatical nuances are.

We would certainly be robbing a man of a crucial path to spiritual growth if we let him off the hook when it came to being the sacrificially loving husband God has called him to be.

I think we'd be doing the same kind of harm to a woman if we explain away her high calling to submit. A submissive woman and a submissive wife learns something profound that equips her to submit to Jesus.

At any rate and to sum up, in the same way that...
...a prophet would learn submission by having his prophetic message evaluated by the congregation.
...a tongues-speaker would learn submission by being fourth in line and not being permitted to speak on a Sunday morning.

...so a woman at a church gathering learns submission by her silence at critical times when the church gathers.

God calls us all to learn to subject our desires for expression to the greater goal of edifying all who are present.

Paul wraps up this whole section with words about authority, spiritual gifts, and order. First, a final word about authority.

Final Principles About Spiritual Gifts (14:36-39)

A Final Word about Authority (14:36-38)

[36] Or was it from you that the word of God first went out? Or has it come to you only? [37] If anyone thinks that 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.¹²

As expressions of Jesus' body, neither the church at Corinth nor Northwest function independently. All churches are all *subject* (there is that word again) to the same "**commandment.**"

We here today want to put into practice as much of what we learn here about the way the church is supposed to work as we can.

We want to encourage full participation in the gatherings of the church and mutual submission for the edification of all.

Second, Paul mentions spiritual gifts one final time.

A Final Word About Spiritual Gifts (14:39)

[39] Therefore, my brothers and sisters, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.

We aren't surprised that he calls spiritual gifts to our attention one final time. After all, he has made a very big deal out of how important the exercise of spiritual gifts are to the proper functioning of the church.

And this says to each one here this morning that no matter what your talent, gift, ability, or passion for service might be, it is affirmed by the Lord and valuable to the church. Put it to work.

Finally, Paul has something to say about order in the church.

A Final Principle Regarding "Order" (14:40)

[40] But all things must be done properly and in an orderly way.

Does this verse seem like a weak way to end Paul's discussion of the work of Jesus' church?

Does it seem as if Paul has wrapped it all up by saying, "*Don't forget Robert's Rules of Order*"?

If so, not so fast. Don't think so lightly of Paul's conclusion.

¹² Various options for what Paul meant: If someone does not recognize the validity of what Paul is writing, (1) then Paul is done with him. (2). then he will not be affirmed by the church. (3). then he will not be rewarded by the Lord on that day.

Instead, think back to the beginning. Think back to Genesis 1. Before creation, chaos reigned (*"the earth was formless and void"* v. 2).

God was unhappy with that situation and replaced the chaos with order through the six days of creation. He made an ordered system called *"the heavens and the earth"* over which He reigned as Sovereign. God brought order out of the chaos.

In case you hadn't noticed, chaos abounds in our world today. It often reigns today in schools, homes, businesses, and government. Chaos may reign in our relationships and even in our own souls.

But Paul says that Jesus' church is to be marked by *"order."*

That is to say that God is now at work as He was at the very beginning, bringing an end to the reign of chaos. And He is destroying chaos through the agency of Jesus' church.

The message of Paul's final words is that when our church works as Jesus intended - full participation by all to bless others; loving submission by all to benefit the whole - we press God's order into a chaotic world.

And by doing that, we whet the world's appetite for the grace that only faith in Jesus can bring.