

Part 4

The Meetings of the Assembly

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In this article, I want to examine what our goals should be for speaking in the assembly, how we can apply the principles Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 14 to today's meetings, and give practical suggestions for the order of the assembly.

If we want to find instructions for how to hold meetings of the *ekklēsia* or assembly in our homes, we will find some information here and there in the New Testament. But 1 Corinthians 14 contains the most complete instructions in the Bible for how the meetings of the *ekklēsia* are to be conducted. Yet, even here, Paul wrote it more as negative instruction to the Christians in Corinth than as positive lessons for Christians through the centuries. Paul wanted to correct some mistakes the Corinthian brethren were making. But we can still learn much from it today. We must be careful, though, or we will make some fundamental errors, such as a number of leaders in the house church movement have done concerning 1 Corinthians 14:26.

The Goals for Speaking in the Assembly

One of the problems the Corinthians had was that they overvalued speaking in tongues. It seems that everyone wanted to exercise this particular gift. In the previous chapter, Paul had just expressed the importance of love. So, he begins 1 Corinthians 14:1 by saying, "Follow after love, and earnestly desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy" (1 Corinthians 14:1). Love is the primary motivation in all that Christians do. Jesus commands that we love one another (John 13:34). We are not supposed to exercise the spiritual gifts God has given us as a way of boasting ourselves or showing off our wonderful speaking abilities. God has given us gifts so that we can show love to our brethren. Whatever gift or gifts God has given us, love must be our motivation. And, of the spiritual gifts God gave at that time, Paul says that the Corinthians should have preferred prophesying, not speaking in tongues.

In the next few verses, Paul explains that the reason prophesying is better than speaking in tongues is that prophesying edifies the assembly. He qualifies this by explaining that tongues can also edify if someone interprets the tongues (interpretation is also a gift) so that

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the assembly can understand. But, whether prophesying or speaking in tongues with interpretation or speaking in any other way, the reasons for speaking in the assembly are "edification, exhortation, and consolation" (verse 3). All of these, of course, stem from love.

The Greek word for "edification" is *oikodomē*. It literally means "house building," and, thus, means "to build up." Paul means that speaking should promote the spiritual growth of the hearers. "Exhortation" is from *paraklēsis*. This word literally means "a calling to one's side." It can mean to call someone to help you, but Paul seems to be using it here to mean to urge or encourage your hearers to action or to continue on. *Paramuthia* is the Greek word translated as "consolation." It also means to encourage people to do something, often with the intention of exhorting them to be consoled, to reassure them. It implies more tenderness than *paraklēsis*.

These reasons for speaking are based on love. We are to speak in the assembly, not to show what good speakers we are or how much we know or even to show off a spiritual gift. We are to speak when we believe we have something to say that will help those who hear us, and we are to make our message as plain as possible.

The Corinthians were apparently speaking in tongues even though no one in the assembly understood those tongues. Paul says that doing this served as much purpose as randomly blowing or plucking an instrument (verse 7). It is speaking into the air (verse 9). If we speak in an unknown language, it's as if we're foreigners to each other (verse 11).

Those who want spiritual gifts should want them for the purpose of building up (*oikodomē*) the assembly (verse 12). When we speak, pray, even when we sing, we should do so with understanding (*nous*—"the mind," "the intellect"; verse 15). "Otherwise," Paul writes, "if you bless with the spirit, how will he who fills the place of the unlearned [referring, simply, to someone who is unskilled in languages] say the 'Amen' at your giving of thanks, seeing he doesn't know what you say? For you most certainly give thanks well, but the other person is not built up [*oikodomeō*]" (verses 16 and 17). Again, every instance of speaking, even praying, is to have a constructive purpose. It is to help others.

Paul could speak in other languages, but he would rather have spoken five words that could be understood so that he could use them to

instruct others than ten thousand words in a language that others didn't understand (verses 18-19).

Speaking in tongues may not be as big a controversy today as in Paul's time (though Pentecostals and charismatics place great importance on what they believe to be tongues speaking), but we can still learn from the principles he is teaching. When we speak in the assembly, it must be clearly, simply, and with the purpose of helping others.

Paul then writes, "Brothers, don't be children in thoughts, yet in malice be babies, but in thoughts be mature" (verse 20). Paul's intention for the Corinthians is that they not be childish by hanging onto the tongues speaking even though no one is benefiting by it. But the principle—to be as innocent as babies but mature in our understanding—is a sound general admonition for all Christians in all ages.

"In the law it is written, 'By men of strange languages and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people. Not even thus will they hear me, says the Lord.' Therefore other languages are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to the unbelieving; but prophesying is for a sign, not to the unbelieving, but to those who believe" (1 Corinthians 14:21-22). Paul refers to a prophecy in Isaiah 28:11-12. He then applies the meaning. Speaking in tongues is not for believers but is a sign to unbelievers, specifically to unbelieving Israel. As we will see, this does not mean that tongues cause the unbelievers to believe. Prophesying, on the other hand, is for believers. Despite what several translations say, the Greek does not say "for a sign" here. Prophesying is not a sign to believers; it is for them because it benefits them, as Paul has already said, through "edification, exhortation, and consolation."

"If therefore the whole assembly is assembled together and all speak with other languages, and unlearned or unbelieving people come in, won't they say that you are crazy? But if all prophesy, and someone unbelieving or unlearned comes in, he is reproved by all, and he is judged by all" (1 Corinthians 14:23-24). Something that we may not have noticed in reading Acts 2, is that the tongues speaking on that day of Pentecost did not convince the crowd. It was Peter's plain speaking that brought about conviction. Tongues was a sign to (or against) the unbelievers, but it only brought questions and even scoffing. Intelligible, plain speaking brought about belief.

Here in 1 Corinthians 14:23-24, almost all of the verbs in these two verses are in the subjunctive mood, the mood that Greek grammarians called the mood expressive of doubt. Paul is saying that were the Corinthians to come together and all speak in tongues, and were an unbelieving outsider to come in, this person would think they were maniacal (*mainomai*). Paul is not saying that he really expects this to happen. Outsiders didn't normally come into the meetings of the *ekklēsia*. He merely wants the Corinthian brethren to step back from the situation and look at themselves the way an outsider might. If they were all speaking in different languages, and an outsider walked into one of their meetings, he would think they were crazy. But if they were prophesying in plain language, the outsider, like the hearers in Acts 2, would be convicted, "declaring that God is amongst you indeed" (verse 25).

Everyone Speak Whenever They Feel Like It?

Now we come to a verse (along with some others that follow) that many, particularly those in the house church movement, misunderstand: "What is it then, brothers? When you come together, each one of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has another language, has an interpretation. Let all things be done to build each other up" (1 Corinthians 14:26). The claims of Frank Viola and George Barna for 1 Corinthians 14 are typical: "This passage describes a gathering with open participation by every member to bring a teaching, a revelation, a song, an exhortation, etc. (verse 26); interjections by the members while others are speaking (verse 30); and spontaneous prophesying by everyone (verses 24, 31)" (*Pagan Christianity* [Carol Stream, IL: BarnaBooks, 2008] 80). It may be true that this was the way it was in Corinth, but was Paul approving it or correcting it?

Was Paul saying that everyone should be allowed to participate with spontaneous prophesying by all? Notice what Paul says about tongues-speakers in verse 27: "If any man speaks in another language, let it be two, or at the most three, and in turn; and let one interpret." At most, two or three may speak in a meeting. What the WEB Bible translates as "in turn" is from the Greek *ana meros*, which means "by part" or "by portion." As *Robertson's Word Pictures* explains, Paul is saying, "One at a time and not over three in all." Instead of interrupting one another whenever they feel like it, they must speak in turn. In verse 28, Paul instructs that, if there be no interpreter for someone who wants to speak in tongues, that person must "keep silent in the assembly."

And what about those who want to prophesy? "Let the prophets speak, two or three, and let the others discern" (verse 29). Again, Paul rules that there are to be only two or three speakers in a meeting, but the others are to "discern." "Discern" comes from the Greek word *diakrinō*. Literally, it means to "separate thoroughly." Thus, it means to judge, to discriminate truth from falsehood, to determine whether what was said agrees with the doctrine of the apostles. So, someone spoke, and the others judged what he said. Likely, they exchanged questions and answers. But if one of the others had a particular revelation to speak, apparently concerning the same topic, "let the first keep silent" (verse 30). This was not a rude interruption while the first man was speaking, but during the judging or questioning, a second person might add to the first person's revelation while the first person kept silent.

"For you all can prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be exhorted" (verse 31). "One by one" is from *kath' ena*. It literally means "by one," but is an idiomatic expression that is used to mean "one by one." It absolutely rules out more than one person speaking at the same time. Also, Paul does not mean that everyone can speak in every meeting. As we see in many other places in the Bible, "all" often does not mean every single person. Paul has already said that there are to be two or three speakers at most. And he unequivocally says in verse 34, "Let your women be silent in the assemblies, for it is not allowed to them to speak, but to be in subjection, as also the Law says" (*Literal Translation of the Holy Bible*). (For more information on women speaking, see, "The Role of Women in the Church") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/women.html>). Paul simply means in verse 31 that everyone who can speak (the men) will eventually have the opportunity (though not necessarily in the same meeting). No one is to insist that he must speak because he is led by the Spirit, because, "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (verse 32).

To allow everyone to speak in one meeting and to speak whenever they felt like it would be chaos, but Paul explains that there must be order, "For God is not a God of confusion, but of peace, as in all the assemblies of the saints" (verse 33). After saying more about women, Paul then preempts anyone who might try to challenge what he says (verses 36-39), and then he ends the chapter by saying, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (verse 40). "Decently" (*euschēmonōs*) means "with good form," and "in order" (*taxis*) means "in a fixed succession." These words do not allow the kind of meeting with everyone speaking whenever they feel like it that is advocated by many in the house church movement.

How We Can Apply This Today

The gifts of tongues, prophesying, and knowledge have now ceased. See "Do you believe that speaking in tongues continues today?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/tonguesQA.htm>) and "Does God still directly communicate with His people?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/directrevelationqa.htm>). They were gifts of direct revelation by which God fed the assembly prior to the written New Testament. Today, we are under the authority of the Word of God as understood from the perspective of the grace of the New Testament, what Paul calls, "the word of his grace" (Acts 20:32). So, if we are not passing on direct revelation to our brethren, what do we do in the assembly?

We are to follow the principle Paul gave us. Motivated by love, we are to speak "edification, exhortation, and consolation." Only now, we take our words from the Bible. And there are still gifts we can use to do this: teaching and exhorting (Romans 12:7-8), praying and singing (1 Corinthians 14:15; 1 Timothy 2:8; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

I must mention two forms of speaking that don't fit in with meetings of the assembly. One is preaching. As I explained in part 3 of this series, preaching was for public evangelistic campaigns. It was a call to believe the Gospel. Since the *ekklēsia* consists of people who already believe, preaching to them is redundant.

The other form of speaking that doesn't fit in the *ekklēsia* is sermonizing. A sermon is not just teaching or exhorting in the assembly. It is a formal oration, a highly structured monologue. Sermons are almost always delivered facing the seated congregation while standing on a pulpit with a lectern holding the Bible and notes. Some preachers now try to move away from this pattern by sitting on a stool or chair or by walking around on a stage in a way that imitates nightclub comics. But they are still giving sermons. Preachers who give sermons rarely allow for judging or questions afterward, and some even become offended if anyone questions what was said.

Speaking in the *ekklēsia* can be as simple as a man reading a passage of Scripture that he believes will be helpful to the assembly. He doesn't have to give any commentary, but, when he's finished, others can ask him about the passage. On the other hand, a speaker can read verses and comment on them, again answering questions afterward. Or a speaker can teach or exhort using a particular topic, backing up what

he says with Scripture. This latter is the closest to a traditional sermon, and the speaker should be careful not to allow it to become a sermon. This can be achieved by staying amongst the rest of the assembly instead of moving to a special place to speak, avoiding an oratorical style, keeping it short, and answering questions afterward. By the way, if you don't know the answer to a question, admit it. Ask everyone to study into it so it can be discussed at the next meeting. No one can be expected to know everything. The Bible does not give a direct command on whether a speaker stands or sits.

Suggestions for the Order of the Assembly

The Bible does not give us instructions for every step on how we are to conduct an assembly meeting. The following are merely my suggestions that, I believe, follow the principles Paul has given.

Sit informally: The floor plan of an institutional church supports the misconception that the building is somehow holy, that parts of the building are holier than others, and that the meeting is a service (the idea likely originating with the Mass) officiated by special functionaries called clergy. Instead, sit informally, such as in a living room or around a table. A round table might be especially good if you have one. With his tongue in his cheek, Anthony Trollope described a clergyman's aversion to a round table:

Now there was something peculiarly unorthodox in the archdeacon's estimation in the idea of a round table.... In his eyes there was something democratic and parvenue in a round table. He imagined that dissenters and calico printers chiefly used them and perhaps a few literary lions more conspicuous for their wit than their gentility. He was a little flurried at the idea of such an article being introduced into the diocese by a protege of his own and at the instigation of his father-in-law. "A round dinner table," said he with some heat, "is the most abominable article of furniture that ever was invented."

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Well, you don't need a round table, but do try to sit in such a way that no one appears to be of a special class apart from the brethren (Matthew 23:6-8).

An elder should supervise: An elder should take on the function of supervising the meeting. This is a function of the overseer, who acts

as a moderator, somewhat similar to the speaker in the House of Commons of a Parliament. He should make the decisions about who the two or three who speak will be (this can be decided before or during the meeting by his recognizing someone who asks to speak, but his decision is final), and he should make sure that the meeting does not become chaotic, everyone remains respectful, and, if no one else questions it during the judging, he should question anything he feels may be doctrinally unsound. He should otherwise be unobtrusive. He does not hold the position of an institutional church pastor, which position does not exist in the Bible. I'll have more to say about the functions of elders in the next installment.

Open with prayer: One of the men should open with prayer, asking for God's blessing, inspiration, and guidance.

One man should speak and then be questioned: Speakers can stand or sit. The Bible does not give us time limits for speaking, so I would suggest that an assembly decide ahead how long they will give speakers. The questioning time should also have a limit. Speaking should be informal, something the speakers may find difficult to achieve at first because we are so used to sermons. Think of it more as a Bible study. The questioners should not interrupt the speaker. Take notes if you want to remember your questions. Questions and answers should be respectful, and the supervisor may need to suggest dropping a topic for now if things become too heated.

The women must be silent: Women are to be silent during the assemblies and are never to try to teach men (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-12). This might seem unfair, but a woman's message to the assembly is in her headcovering—through which she preaches submission to her husband as a picture of the submission of the *ekklēsia* to Christ (1 Corinthians 11:2-16), and in her appropriate clothing with good works (1 Timothy 2:9-10).

Music: Music can potentially cause much division. Will people sing solo? Can women sing solo? Can women sing congregationally? Will you allow musical instruments? Will you allow all kinds of musical instruments? Will you sing only psalms? Only hymns? What about contemporary music? It is truly a can of worms!

We do not sing at every meeting, have no solos, sometimes use a keyboard but usually sing a cappella, and sing only hymns. This position might be difficult to defend, but we are at peace with it, and that counts for something.

I want to add here that, as I said earlier, even when we sing, we should sing with understanding. I think many people don't pay attention to the words they are singing. If they did, they wouldn't sing them. Many songs, even some of the traditional hymns, have unsound doctrine or are even nonsensical. Make sure that what you are singing is biblically sound. Some of the most doctrinally truthful hymns are in *Gadsby's Hymnal*.

End with prayer: This is the time to mention prayer requests and to ask for God's blessing on everyone. I will also point out that there might be times of trial when entire meetings can be devoted to prayer (Acts 12:12).

I hope this answers your questions about how to hold a meeting of the *ekklēsia*. In the next installment, we'll talk about the functions of the elders and servants.