

2. Meetings of the Whole Church

In our last topic, we talked about three types of meetings in Acts 2. Today, we will be looking at another type of meeting that we see in the New Testament. That is a meeting of the whole church. Although there are several passages that mention meetings of the whole church, only one passage gives an extended description of what a church does when it comes together as a whole church. That passage is 1 Corinthians 14:23-35. We will look at that passage today.

As we begin, we might ask a question that people need to think about when they talk about worship. When we gather together as a whole church to worship, who is the audience and who are the participants? The answer that you give to that question will reflect what you have learned about meetings of the whole church from the culture in which you have lived. Often what the culture has taught you is not what the Bible teaches. From the Word of God, we see that when the whole church gathers together:

- ◆ God is the audience - 1 Chronicles 16:29; Psalm 96:9; John 4:24; 1 Corinthians 14:24-25
- ◆ We are the participants – 1 Corinthians 14:23-35
 - Verse 24 - all prophesy
 - Verse 26 - each of you has a Psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation
 - Verse 27-28 - in another language the number of speakers is limited to two or three and only with an interpreter
 - Verse 29 - let two or three prophets speak and let the others judge
 - Verse 31 – you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all be encouraged

The services of the early church were patterned after the services in the Jewish synagogues. In the Jewish synagogues, they would have prayer (Matthew 6:5), seven to nine readings from the Word of God in each service (Christ read the Word as was His custom – Luke 4:16-20), then they would have two or three explain the Word to give words of encouragement (Acts 13:15) and a time of praise and thanksgiving (Nehemiah 9:5). The Christians added to this the breaking of bread - communion (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

In the city of Jerusalem, it is estimated that there were about four hundred synagogues. The fact that there were so many synagogues meant that everyone had a synagogue within a short distance from their home. We also see that there were different synagogues for the different languages and cultures in Acts 6:9 - the synagogue of the Freedmen (descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompei and taken to Rome), the synagogue of the Cyrenians and Alexandrians (Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from North Africa), and Jews from Cilicia and Asia (the area that is now Turkey).

Once the Christians were no longer welcome in the synagogues, they moved their services to homes (Acts 18:7) or other buildings (Acts 19:9). Most churches actually met in homes for the first 300 years of Christianity and their services were very much like the service mentioned in 1 Corinthians 14:23-35. It was only after the Roman emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire that buildings and cathedrals began to be built. When

that happened, the church quickly began to make the transition from God being the audience and the Christians being the participants to a very different style of service. The rise of the Roman church resulted in the priests being the participants and the people becoming the audience or spectators. The rise of the Protestant church in the Reformation continued to follow the Roman pattern instead of returning to the Biblical pattern.

As a result, today we see many churches where the emphasis is very man centered rather than God centered. This has become especially true in many of the churches that are known as seeker driven churches. The focus has shifted from the worship of God to the immediate felt needs of the people. This has resulted in services where:

- The audience is the people
- The participants are the professionals on the platform

This change often causes people to measure “success” in worldly terms “nickels and noses” rather than seeking to please God by developing healthy reproducing Christians. Success is measured by the number of people in the audience rather than the number of Godly reproducing Christians that the church has sent out to minister to the world without Christ.

As we come to 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, we see a key statement about what should be happening when the whole church comes together. That verse tells us, “But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on *his* face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.” The word prophecy speaks about the written Word of God. The word “prophesy” means *to read or quote what has already been written down in the Word of God*. It is the second of these words which is used in this verse.

Here, we see that all are encouraged to read or quote the Word of God. This can include both reading as a group and individuals reading passages of Scripture. Notice that it is the Word of God that convicts the unbeliever or the one that is unlearned. As we read the Word alone or as a group we are worshiping God by proclaiming that His Word is more important than our opinions. Something else also happens as an individual gets in front of a group and reads or quotes the Word of God. That person is learning to become comfortable first reading and later reading and explaining the Word of God publicly to those in the service. This is an important step to helping a person learn to become obedient to the instructions of 1 Peter 3:15, “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.” A person who has learned to trust the Lord to give him the strength to read the Word of God publicly will also learn that God will give him the strength to read and explain the Word to one or a few individuals privately.

Verse 26 goes on to tell us various ways that we share the Word of God in a meeting of the whole church. Some may:

- * read a Psalm
- * explain a doctrine
- * read a passage in another language (there are instructions which limit this type of reading in verses 27 and 28)

- * have a revelation (instruction to explain a truth)
- * have an interpretation (this is explanation of a passage to make the meaning of the passage clear and understandable – verses 29 through 33)

In verse 29, we notice that it was common for more than one to explain the Word of God in a service. The early church did not limit the explaining of Scripture to one person. Instead, two or three would explain the Scripture and the others would listen to make certain that they were explaining the passage clearly. Verses 30 and 31 show that if a person was not explaining the Word clearly, others could add their comments of explanation. In this way, all were learning and all were being encouraged.

Verse 32 and 33 show that those who were explaining the Word were to come prepared to explain the Word clearly. This meant that they were to study throughout the week so that they were allowing their spirit to be led by the Holy Spirit. Part of our worship of God is thorough preparation so that we will explain the Word of God clearly to others. This will help to prevent confusion and produce peace.

Today, many churches complain because they lack men. Verses 34 and 35 tell us why that was not a problem in the early church in most places. The women chose to submit and let the men exercise the leadership in worship. They also encouraged their husbands by asking them questions about the Word of God at home. However, this was apparently not true in the church at Corinth. When Adam and Eve sinned, Genesis 3:16 tells us that man was given the responsibility for leadership. When Adam failed to exercise spiritual leadership in Genesis 3:6 (the verse tells us that he was with Eve) he is the one that God held accountable. God still holds men accountable for spiritual leadership as these verses show us. When men do not take their God-given responsibility to lead their families and the church in worship, they do as Adam did when he blamed Eve.

A church where the men are active participants rather than just spectators will usually attract additional men. We might say, “We either use them or we lose them.” In 1 Corinthians 14:23-35, we see that men are to take the responsibility to read and explain the Word of God so that they are active participants and not just spectators. That is a part of their worship of God. This also gives them an opportunity to lead their family by example.

Meetings of the whole church are important as we gather together to worship God. As we do so, we need to remember that God is the audience (we are worshiping Him) and we are the participants. May the Lord richly bless you as you help others learn to, “Worship God in spirit and in truth.” – John 4:24