

WORSHIP: STRATEGY TO STIR UP LOVE

Jesus equipped the early church with a worship strategy designed to promote love and good deeds, edify, encourage, strengthen, and instruct. His plan called for ordinary believers to be able to regularly and significantly contribute to corporate worship. There was an open format for sharing, with orderly spontaneity. In contrast, today's worship services have become more of a spectator sport.

Did you know that Jesus actually *commanded* that the laity be unleashed through an open-pulpit format? In the New Testament churches, those prompted by the Spirit were free to offer testimonies, to share spiritual experiences, to give exhortations, to lead out in prayer, to testify, to sing, and to praise. Generally, each person who spoke did so in accordance with his spiritual gifting. The prime directive was that everything be designed to edify (strengthen, build up, encourage) the congregation.

PROFIT

There are many benefits to an open format. More people become actively involved in building up the church. The opportunity to make truly meaningful contributions to the meeting heightens congregational interest. The ideas that are shared tend to be practical, from the heart, and drawn from real-world applications of God's Word. It prevents the development of apathy from the frustration with passivity. There is a fuller expression of the spiritual gifts that involve speaking. This "open mic" approach also helps to avoid the atrophying of spiritual gifts from lack of use. All this not only takes a tremendous load off the pastors, but it allows them to enjoy being ministered to.

PROFESSORS

In the *Mid-America Baptist Theological Journal*, professor **Jimmy Milikin** stated that in early Christian congregations, "there was apparently a free expression of the Spirit. In the public assembly one person might have a psalm, another brother a teaching, another a revelation, another a tongue, another an interpretation."¹

In *The Nature of the Early Church*, church historian **Ernest Scott** wrote: "The exercise of the spiritual gifts was thus the characteristic element in primitive worship. Those gifts might vary in their nature and degree according to the capacity of each individual, but they were bestowed on all and room was allowed in the service for the participation of all who were present.... Every member was expected to contribute something of his own to the common worship."²

In *Introducing the New Testament*, theologian **John Drane** wrote: "In the earliest days ... their worship was spontaneous. This seems to have been regarded as the ideal, for when Paul describes how a church meeting should proceed, he depicts a Spirit-led participation by many.... There was the fact that anyone had the freedom to participate in such worship. In the ideal situation, when everyone was inspired by the Holy Spirit, this was the perfect expression of Christian freedom."³

¹ Jimmy Milikin, "Disorder Concerning Public Worship," *Mid-America Baptist Theological Journal* (Memphis, TN: Mid-America Baptist Seminary Press, 1983), 125.

² Ernest Scott, *The Nature of the Early Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 79.

³ John Drane, *Introducing the New Testament* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1999), 402.

Concerning public worship in the New Testament church, London Bible College lecturer **G.W. Kirby** concluded: “There appears to have been considerable fluidity with time given for spontaneous participation.”⁴

Scottish commentator **William Barclay** stated: “The really notable thing about an early Church service must have been that almost everyone came feeling that he had both the privilege and obligation of contributing something to it.”⁵

PROOF

Open-Synagogue Format: Paul was free to preach the Gospel in synagogues throughout the Roman world (**Acts 13:14–15, 14:1, 17:1–2, 17:10, 18:4, 19:8**). If the ancient synagogue meetings were in any way like modern Christian worship services, Paul would have needed to develop alternative strategies for spreading the gospel to the Jews. First-century synagogues were open to the participation of those in attendance. Jewish Christians comprised the first churches; thus, it is no wonder that the early church meetings were open to audience participation.⁶

Encouraging One Another: The author of Hebrews urged his readers (ordinary Christians) to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together ... but encouraging one another” (**Heb 10:24–25**). Before coming to church, every believer was responsible for giving thought to how he might inspire others. It is clear then that early church meetings were designed to provide ample opportunity for mutual encouragement. The focus was not exclusively on pastors; it was on “one another.” Participatory worship is in keeping with the principle of the fifty-nine “one another” Scripture passages (e.g., **Jn 13:34; Ro 12:10; 1Pt 4:8; 1Jn 3:11**, etc.). There was a principle of participation. It was about each member doing his part as led by the Spirit.⁷ All members of Christ’s body bore the responsibility to encourage the others through testimony, song, praise, prayer, exhortation, teaching, and the sharing of personal spiritual lessons learned.

Paul Talked with Them: **Acts 20:7** records that Paul spoke all night when he visited the church at Troas. The Greek verb that describes his actions is derived from *dialegomai* (the English word “dialogue” is a transliteration). It means discuss rather than preach.⁸ In **Acts 18:4** and **19:8**, the same word is rendered as “reasoned” and “reasoning.” The English Standard Version states that Paul “talked with” them. Paul undoubtedly did most of the speaking that night; however, it was not an uninterruptable sermon as if broadcast on the radio. Thus, the time that the early church set aside for teaching, even when led by an apostle, was to some degree discussion-oriented, another indicator that early church meetings were characterized by a principle of participation.⁹

⁴ G. W. Kirby, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1, ed. Merrell Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1982), 850.

⁵ William Barclay, “Letters to the Corinthians,” *Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 135.

⁶ We do not advocate incorporating Jewish synagogue practices into the church. The point is simply to show that participatory worship would not have been an unfamiliar idea to the earliest Christians.

⁷ The Spirit’s prompting is an essential element in participatory worship; otherwise, it would be merely a religious version of amateur hour. Every believer has been given a spiritual gift to be used to build up the church, and the believer is to minister in accordance with this gifting. It is the duty of the leadership to equip the church to understand and practice this.

⁸ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 185.

⁹ Allowing for questions and dialog is good.

Each One Has: Guidelines for the use of spiritual gifts when “the whole church comes together” are presented in **1 Corinthians 14:23**. The *ESV Study Bible* states: “These verses give a fascinating glimpse into the kinds of activities that took place when the early church gathered as the body of Christ to worship the Lord.”¹⁰ This glimpse reveals a principle of participation: “What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (**14:26**).

To whom was **1 Corinthians 14:26** written? It was directed to “each one” of the “brothers”—not just pastors. These early meetings were not nearly as pastor-centric as modern worship services. If the words “each one” (**14:26**) were replaced with “only one,” which would better characterize your church services? Indeed, **1 Corinthians 11–14** is a lengthy passage about church meetings. Amazingly, *pastors are not even mentioned in the entire section*. This does not mean that pastors are unimportant. On the contrary, they are critical to the proper functioning of a church. Thayer defined an *episcopos* as “one charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done are done rightly.”¹¹ They are essential personnel. However, it appears that in worship services, pastors are to be more like side-line coaches than star players.

New Testament believers did not merely *attend* services. “Each one” was free to use his spiritual gifts to build up the gathered church. They were active, vital participants who could significantly contribute to what went on in the gathering.¹² Their motto for church meetings could have been “every member a minister.”

Edification: The overarching purpose for all that is said or done in such a gathering is edification: “Let all things be done for building up” (**1Co 14:26**). The Greek for “building up” (*oikodomé*) is related to the act of strengthening or encouraging. One lexicon has described *oikodomé* as the action of one who promotes another’s growth in Christian wisdom, piety, and holiness.¹³ Any comment made in participatory worship had to be prompted by the Spirit and lovingly designed to encourage, to build up, to strengthen, or to edify. If not, it was inappropriate and was to be left unspoken. Every testimony had to be well thought out so that it would build up the church. To be edifying, all teaching had to be both true and practicable. The music had to honor the Lord. It had to be theologically sound. Prophecies were for “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (**1Co 14:3**).¹⁴ The Corinthians were told, “Since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church” (**1Co 14:12**). This highlights the principle of participation in early church gatherings: each person ministered according to his spiritual gifts. As **Romans 12:6** says: “having gifts ... given to us, let us *use them*” (emphasis added).

Music: The regulation of spiritual gifts in worship is addressed in **1 Corinthians 14**. Thus, when Paul wrote that “each one” had a “hymn” (*psalms*, **14:26**), he meant each one gifted in music. All Spirit-led musicians in good standing with the church had the freedom to edify the congregation through this gift.

Furthermore, it appears that there was at least some degree of spontaneity in the music. The early church’s singing also had a “one another” aspect. Even believers who were not musically gifted were admonished: “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (**Eph**

¹⁰ Dennis & Grudem, eds., *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2212.

¹¹ Joseph Thayer, *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 243.

¹² Not every person should be expected to say something at every gathering.

¹³ Thayer, *Lexicon*, 40.

¹⁴ Even convicting reproof can be edifying.

5:19). Similarly, the Colossian believers were exhorted to “[admonish] one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (**Col 3:16**). Those with musical gifts should facilitate the entire church’s singing during worship. It has been cautioned: “the music must not turn the church into an audience enjoying the music, but into a congregation singing the Lord’s praises in His presence.”¹⁵ Our music should reflect the Psalmist’s invitation: “Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!” (**Ps 95:2**).

Teaching: In-depth, practicable biblical exposition was an integral part of each weekly church meeting. Pastors rightly do most of the teaching on the Lord’s Day. However, the New Testament says that “each one” of the brothers who had the gift of teaching also had the freedom to bring the weekly “lesson” (**1Co 14:26**). Thus James cautioned: “not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (**Jm 3:1**). This caution makes sense in light of the participatory meetings that characterized the early church. In accordance with the principle of participation, there was clearly an opportunity for supernaturally gifted, mature brothers to teach (with pastoral approval and coaching).¹⁶

Two or Three Tongues: The participatory nature of early church meetings is also evident in the guidelines for those who spoke in tongues: “If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God” (**1Co 14:27–28**). Interpretation was required “so that the church might be built up” (**1Co 14:5**). Multiple people participated, one at a time, and there was clearly a degree of spontaneity. Speaking in tongues is obviously a controversial topic.¹⁷ Even if it is no longer practiced, the principle of spontaneous participation remains. People could still contribute through teachings, songs, testimonies, prayers, exhortations, encouragements, and public Scripture readings.

Two or Three Prophets: The participatory nature of New Testament gatherings is also seen in the guidelines for prophecy: “Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said” (**1Co 14:29**). The impromptu nature of prophecy is clear: “If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent” (**1Co 14:30**). The goal of prophecy is “that all may learn and all be encouraged” (**1Co 14:31**).

“Prophet” is a transliteration of *prophétés*. *Pro* can mean either before or forth, and *phétés* means to speak. Generally, the prophets received divine revelation, which they shared. They proclaimed and interpreted divine truth.¹⁸ This revelation might have concerned sin in someone’s life (**1Co 14:24–25**), it might have been a word of encouragement (**Acts 15:32**), or it might have been a prediction of the future (**Acts 11:27–30**).¹⁹ Modern prophets might give practical insights about the correct application of Scripture. They are passionate people who speak words of encouragement, exhortation, motivation, and application. They are change agents who impart life into church meetings.²⁰

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 212.

¹⁶ Because 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibits women from teaching men, only brothers should bring the lesson.

¹⁷ Were all charismatic churches to follow the guidelines of 1 Corinthians 14 (a maximum of three, one at a time, could be interpreted), much of what passes for legitimate tongues would be deemed out of order.

¹⁸ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 723.

¹⁹ To learn more about prophecy, see *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* by Wayne Grudem.

²⁰ It is the leaders’ job to save the church from needless vexation by the emotionally unstable who fancy themselves prophets and would give weekly warnings of an atomic holocaust.

It must be noted that prophecy and teaching are not the same gifts (**Ro 12: 6-7, 1Co 12:28**), even though they both result in learning and encouragement. Prophets tend to receive their messages through direct revelation from the Spirit, whereas teachers spend hours in the study of written revelation (Scripture). Because the source of a prophet's message was somewhat subjective, his revelations had to be judged: "Let the others weigh what is said" (**1Co 14:29b**; see also **1Th 5:20–21**). The main point is the principle of participation with a fair amount of spontaneity. It is the pastors' duty to be sure that everything is done "decently and in order" (**1Co 14:40**).

Women To Be Silent: Scripture states that "women should keep silent in the churches" (**1Co 14:33b**). There would be no need to convey this to most of today's churches because generally *no one*, man or woman, except the pastors, speaks. Whatever this means, it would not have been written unless first-century church meetings were participatory. Thus, even this prohibition reflects the principle of participation.

PERSPECTIVE

It is helpful to have a good perspective on why participatory worship is important, and how it was lost. After Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire (A.D. 380), large pagan temples were often repurposed as church buildings. Church gatherings moved from the relative intimacy of Roman villas to vast, impersonal basilicas. These large church services naturally morphed into performances by professionals. Socratic teaching gave way to eloquent monologues. Spontaneity was lost, and with it, the principle of participation. The "one another" aspect of assembly became impractical. "Each one has" became "only one has." Informality was transformed into formality. Church leaders began to wear special clerical costumes. Worship aids, such as incense, icons, candles, and hand gestures, were introduced. In *A Lion Handbook—The History of Christianity*, Church of Scotland minister **Henry Sefton**, wrote: "Worship in the house-church had been of an intimate kind in which all present had taken an active part ... (this) changed from being 'a corporate action of the whole church' into 'a service said by the clergy to which the laity listened.'"²¹

Many consider traditional worship services to be participatory simply because the congregation joins in responsive readings, partakes of the Lord's Supper, enjoys congregational singing, and gives financial offerings. These are positive aspects of worship; however, they do not constitute an open format. **Gordon Fee** observed, "By and large, the history of the church points to the fact that in worship we do not greatly trust the diversity of the body. Edification must always be the rule, and that carries with it orderliness so that all may learn and all be encouraged. But it is no great credit to the historical church that in opting for 'order' it also opted for a silencing of the ministry of the many."²²

Many of us have heard of couch potatoes. Have we trained God's people to be pew potatoes? Many feel that they might as well stay home and watch church on television. Not allowing the ministry of the many can cause apathy, as illustrated in the joke about a Sunday school teacher who once asked the children, "Why must we be quiet in church?" One perceptive little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping in there."

The verbal participation of the members makes for a greater working of the Spirit because it allows the many gifts of the ministry to flourish. According to Paul's writings in **1 Corinthians 14**, God might burden a number of believers, independently of one another, to bring

²¹ Henry Sefton, *A Lion Handbook—The History of Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Lion Publishing, 1988), 151.

²² Gordon Fee, "Corinthians," 698.

a short testimony or word of encouragement, to lead out in prayer, or to bring a song. Additional applications and illustrations can be offered by the body at large to augment a word of instruction. Brothers could ask questions or make comments during or after the teaching time. New believers learn how to think with the mind of Christ as they observe the more mature believers share in the meeting. Maturity will greatly increase. The brothers will begin to own the meeting. They will take responsibility for the flow of the meeting as they become active participants rather than passive spectators. Edification is thus accomplished.

PRESCRIPTION

After providing guidelines for participatory worship, Paul wrote, “The things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord” (**1Co 14:37**). A command is not a suggestion. It is more than a good idea. The instructions in **1 Corinthians** are not merely interesting history. These participatory regulations are not just descriptions of primitive church meetings. In some sense, they are prescriptive. Paul even gave advice on dealing with those who argue against obeying these guidelines: “If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (**1Co 14:38**). How will you lead your church to obey the Lord’s command regarding participatory worship?

Our proposition is that you consider introducing participatory worship to your church. Perhaps you fear it is not worth the anticipated problems it might create. Where there are no oxen, the manger is clean, but much increase comes from their strength (**Pr 14:4**). The potential blessing is worth the risk. It is worth noting the seven last words of declining churches: “We never did it that way before.”

Some in Corinth wanted to conduct their meetings differently from the requirements set forth in **1 Corinthians 14**. They were asked two questions: “Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?” (**1Co 14:36**). The word of God clearly did not originate with the Corinthians, and they most certainly were not the only people whom it had reached. (As such, whatever applied to the Corinthian church would also apply to us.) These questions were designed to convince the Corinthian believers that they had no authority to conduct their meetings in any other way than that prescribed by the apostles. The principle of participation was to be observed.

Should the time when the body comes together be focused mostly on pastors, or is it an opportunity for God to speak through multiple saints to those gathered? Changing the focus to the messages of multiple people strengthens the church as a whole. The church is thus not as dependent on the gifts of one man. Often, when a gifted pastor leaves a church, attendance plummets. The likelihood of the development of a personality cult is lessened. One of **Martin Luther**’s arguments for reformation concerned the priesthood of all believers. Do we really believe in the priesthood of the believer? If so, perhaps we could prove it by allowing the priests to minister during our services.

PRACTICUM

Leadership’s Role: Church leaders who are new to the idea of participatory worship are wisely cautious. With good reason, they anticipate unedifying scenarios. One of an elder’s roles is to keep church meetings on track in order to be true to the prime directive that all things be edifying. Lexicographer **Joseph Thayer** defined an *episcopos* as “a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly.”²³ He described a *presbutéros* as one

²³ Thayer, *Lexicon*, 243.

who “presided over the assemblies.”²⁴ If a meeting is not edifying, the elders are responsible for making the necessary adjustments.

Ephesians 4:11–12 reveals that it is the duty of pastor-teachers to equip the saints for ministry. This includes training that prepares them to make meaningful contributions in a participatory meeting. If the Scriptures truly reveal God’s desire for participatory meetings to be held, then we can expect God to work through the elders to see that the meetings are successful. There is order in a cemetery; however, there is no life. It is much better to risk a little disorder to have life. The Holy Spirit must be trusted to work in the life of a church.

Edifying participatory church meetings do not just happen. New Testament-style participatory worship is to be Spirit led, and the Spirit works through elders to make it edifying. They are behind-the-scenes coaches, encouraging and training so that everyone ministers in accordance with his spiritual gifts and everything that is said is edifying. Below are some typical scenarios. Details are provided to help those who are just beginning to experiment with participatory meetings to avoid some common pitfalls.

Baby Steps: Start slowly. Do not try to have fully participatory meetings initially. During the week, if you hear a brother share something that the Lord taught him, enlist him to share it in church the following Sunday. Work with him to make sure that it is short (in no more than seven minutes) and practicable. Coach him to ensure brevity and clarity. Each week, a few brothers could be scheduled to share a short testimony in the meeting.

A person who shares a witnessing experience can motivate the timid to evangelism. A testimony about a need met or a prayer answered in God’s providence can encourage others who are going through hard times. A person who is involved in a jail ministry can talk about good results with inmates and induce others to get involved. Real-life stories with a spiritual emphasis are very uplifting. The congregation will thus become accustomed to greater participation and have a model for the appropriate type of edifying sharing. As the congregation grows accustomed to this approach, the total time allotted for sharing can be increased, and those who are moved by the Spirit can be given more latitude to rise from their seats to share without having been scheduled to speak.

Cultural Resistance: In the West, having participatory instead of performance-style worship is countercultural. Many will find participatory worship uncomfortable. One Baptist church that experimented with it on Sunday nights suffered a precipitous decline in attendance at that service. (The members said that they did not want to hear amateur opinions; they wanted to hear polished presentations by professional pastors.) Time, teaching, training, and equipping by leadership are necessary for God’s people to be prepared for participatory worship. The typical church member is not a professional speaker; thus, the potential for imperfect presentations is ever present. However, “love bears all things” (**1Co 13:7**). If participatory worship is truly Christ’s desire, then how strange it seems in our culture is ultimately immaterial. As with the pearl of great price, the benefit is worth the cost. People will become more open to participatory meetings as they are taught obedience to God’s Word and understand that it is a scriptural concept.

Sound Barrier: After years of passively attending services, most Christians are conditioned to sit silent in church as if watching television. Patience and encouragement are necessary to overcome this. Meaningful participation will seem awkward to people initially. Continual encouragement by the leadership may be necessary until the “sound barrier” is broken. During the week, elders should work behind the scenes to encourage the brethren to share.

²⁴ Thayer, *Lexicon*, 536.

Asking men to lead a weekly prayer or public reading of Scripture can help them to overcome their reticence.

Open participation does not preclude private preparation. Every brother should be coached to consider *in advance* how the Lord might have him edify the church (**Heb 10:25**). If a string were stretched across the surface of a stream, various things that would otherwise have floated past would become attached to it as the day progressed. Similarly, thinking all week long about what to bring to the next meeting helps greatly. If no one brought food to a family reunion, there would not be much of a feast. If no one comes to participatory worship prepared to contribute, there will not be much sharing.

The following could be asked of the brothers: *What has the Lord shown you this week during your time with Him? Is there a testimony the Lord would have you bring? Could you commit to begin a time of conversational prayer? Is there a song that would edify the church? Is there a subject or passage of Scripture to teach on?*

The worst cause of a lack of participation is the absence of anything spiritual to share. Many Christians are neither walking with the Lord nor living Spirit-filled lives. They may be as straight as a gun barrel theologically, but just as empty. Such spiritually dull believers will have little that is worthwhile to share on Sunday. Edifying participatory worship happens only when church members abide in Jesus. Too often, liturgy and clerical dominance become a necessary cover for congregational carnality. In contrast, genuine heartfelt sharing and confession in the meeting can cause those living lives of hypocrisy to come under conviction and repent of their sin. Obedience is contagious! People who love Jesus do not come to church to worship; they bring their worship with them.

Unedifying Remarks: Sometimes, after brothers become accustomed to sharing, they become overly casual in their remarks. Unless someone has the gift of prophecy, spontaneous utterances typically do not edify the assembly. An open format does not mean that people can say anything they want to say. Leaders need to remind the church that whatever is said in the meeting must be designed to build up the body. Sometimes, merely requiring speakers to rise and stand behind a pulpit, lectern, or music stand at the front of the room (as opposed to speaking from their seats) will effectively squelch casual, unedifying remarks. The elders must coach each person to remember: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (**Pr 25:11**).

Church meetings must not become therapy sessions for the wounded. The focus should not be exclusively on needy persons. If allowed, spiritual black holes can suck the life out of the meeting. Such people do need counseling; however, it should be done at a time other than during public worship. Corporate edification must remain the prime directive.

It is the elders’ responsibility to help people understand what is and is not edifying and to provide private coaching to help people to make only edifying comments. Brothers should be trained to tell what the time is rather than how to build a clock. As does a pencil, every message should have a point. Those who share should also be taught to focus on one point to keep it short. The words spoken must have power. The goal must be exhortation. Despite the best modeling, some brothers simply will not “get it”; they will have to be privately and repeatedly coached regarding edifying and unedifying comments.

There is to be a certain degree of decorum. Peter said, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God” (**1Pe 4:10–11**). Participatory worship should not be interactive. It is generally not edifying when someone in the audience tries to interact with the person who was

burdened to stand up to share. The church should not be subjected to having to listen to a public conversation. To edify the church during the worship time, individuals should present verbal offerings with the same attitude in which the Old Testament saints brought offerings. Others should be kept from piling on or adding to something that has already been offered (we call it dieseling).

Aberrant Theology: The lure of a participatory meeting might attract those looking to promote an eccentric doctrine. This is another situation where elders are needed. Timothy, stationed in Ephesus and temporarily functioning as an elder, was to “charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine” (1Ti 1:3). One qualification for an elder is that he must “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). Similarly, Titus was told: “Exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you” (Titus 2:15). John warned about a known deceiver: “Do not receive him into your house” (2Jn 1:10).²⁵ The prevention and correction of error is one reason elders are needed.

One way to filter out doctrinal error is for the church to have an official statement of faith. Remarks made during the church meeting must be consistent with the belief statement. In addition, only brothers who are in good standing with the church should be allowed to share. Each week, an announcement should be made that only church members are permitted to speak. Members with non-heretical but, nevertheless, odd beliefs must not be free to publicly express them. The elders are the gatekeepers for would-be speakers.

Pooled Ignorance: During an interview on participatory worship, a Christian radio broadcaster astutely asked, “How do you keep the guy who knows the least from saying the most?” Rather than considering in advance how to encourage the church, some will come to the meeting unprepared. People who are socially clueless and lacking the Spirit’s direction will make impromptu, rambling, repetitive speeches that would be better left unsaid. It is the elders’ job to know the congregation well enough to be aware of those who are likely to do excessive and inappropriate sharing. They must work with them to help them to be informed, concise, and judicious in their sharing.

Disruptive Visitors: Uninformed guests could easily vex the church with unedifying remarks. Self-centered visitors might want to dominate the meeting. The mentally unstable will seek to speak loudly and often, to the chagrin of the assembly. Critics might publicly attack the church’s beliefs. Wandering heretics will view the participatory meeting as a chance to promote errant theologies. Leaders are needed in such cases to keep the peace and to restore order with wisdom and patience. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure; thus, it would be wise to allow only church members or invited guests the opportunity to speak. God’s flock must be protected from unnecessary vexation.

Congregation Size: Meetings that are either too big (hundreds of people) or too small (fewer than ten or twenty) present hindrances to participation. The presence of too many people will be inimical to intimacy. It will intimidate the shy and inhibit sharing and accountability. Only a tiny fraction of those present in a big meeting would be able to share anyway (even if they had the courage). Too few contributions from people in a tiny congregation could make the meeting seem dull because of the absence of diversity of spiritual gifts. The typical first-century church, meeting in a wealthy person’s villa, would have sixty-five to seventy people in attendance.²⁶ There were 120 in the upper room.²⁷ Early church meetings comprised scores of people: not hundreds and, certainly, not thousands.

²⁵ John’s instructions were especially relevant to house churches with participatory meetings.

²⁶ Graydon Snyder, *Church Life Before Constantine* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1991), 70.

One home-field advantage for small churches is the possibility of having truly edifying participatory worship experiences. When well-managed by pastors, open worship taps into the congregation's spiritual gifts. People become excited about attending because they can make meaningful contributions and be blessed by those of others. Sometimes, a complete message from God is conveyed through the beautiful blending of testimonies, teaching, songs, and encouragement of multiple people (many springs flowing into one river). The promotion of "one anothering" in the assembly can be of great encouragement to those involved with small churches. Why would Scripture speak of these things if they were not important? Participatory worship can transform small church meetings from ordinary to extraordinary.

Latecomers: If a brother is earnestly sharing from his heart when a family suddenly comes late into the meeting room, everyone will naturally turn to see who is entering. The latecomers then climb over people who are already seated, chairs are shuffled, etc. What effect would this have on the message that was being shared? It will be disrupted, and the Spirit will be squelched. Late arrivals should be asked to wait quietly outside. They should not enter the meeting area until a song is being sung or there is a change of speakers.

In participatory worship, it is not unusual for a latecomer to request a song that has already been sung. Even worse, a late brother might bring an exhortation related to a current event that the church had already spent several minutes considering. The church could adopt a policy that requires late arrivals to refrain from speaking because they would not know what has already transpired (it will also discourage tardiness).

So Little Time: If a service is limited to one hour, incorporating music, participatory sharing, and an in-depth lesson will be difficult. A one-and-a-half or two-hour meeting would be more ideal; even then, the meeting time must be carefully managed. Careful attention should be paid to the time designated for each phase of the meeting (singing, sharing, and teaching). In addition, limits should be placed on the number of people who can share and the amount of time allotted to each person. Remarks could be limited to 7 to 10 minutes. This will prevent the meeting from being dominated by one person and thus allow multiple people to share. It will be necessary for the leadership to occasionally interrupt long-winded speakers. A sample bulletin is provided in the appendix.

In-Depth Teaching: Feeding the sheep is a critical component of healthy church life. Quality in-depth teaching that is geared to believers should be an integral part of each Sunday church meeting. This is the "lesson" that is referred to in **1 Corinthians 14:26**. Our Lord instructed the apostles to make disciples by *teaching* obedience to all His commandments (**Mt 28:20**). **Acts 2:42** says that the Jerusalem church was devoted to the apostles' *teaching*. One of the requirements for an elder is that he have the ability to *teach* (**1Ti 3:2**). Elders who work hard at *teaching* are declared worthy of a double honor (financial support; **1Ti 5:17-18**). Thus, the importance of teaching should not be underestimated. The ideal is a steady diet of the systematic exposition of Scripture with clear, practical applications. (If the "what" [the content] does not lead to "so what" [the application], then the "what" has not been taught correctly.) The goal of all instruction should be to promote love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith (**1Ti 1:5**). Because we want people to come to Christ, we can be tempted to convert church meetings into evangelistic services. However, the New Testament indicates that church gatherings are primarily for the benefit of believers. They serve to build Christians up in their faith and to encourage them to be obedient.

²⁷ Acts 1:15 may not reflect a normal church meeting; however, it indicates the number of people who could assemble in a first-century room.

Charismatic Gifts: Churches that promote the exercising of charismatic gifts must ensure that the guidelines in **1 Corinthians 14:26–32** are followed closely. Speaking in tongues is not to be allowed unless it can be interpreted. A maximum of three tongue speakers should be allowed. Prophecies should also be limited to three speakers. Anyone who prophesies must realize that his words will be weighed carefully and judged. Managing this can be confusing and frustrating because the overly emotional and unstable often imagine they have such gifts. Perhaps that is why the Thessalonians were given this admonition: “Do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (**1Th 5:20–22**). In the midst of these supernatural utterances, there must be order: “The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets. God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (**1Co 14:33a**). Here again, the elders played a key role in ensuring that everything was done in a “fitting and orderly way” (**1Co 14:40**). Elders are responsible for quality control.

Women: Participatory worship obviously does not mean “anything goes.” Those who speak in tongues must be silent if there is no interpreter. Prophets must be silent if interrupted. In each case, restraint is required for the greater good. Paul’s first letter to Timothy (**1Ti 2:12**) reveals that women are not to teach or have authority over men. Thus, sisters are not free to present the lesson (**1Co 14:26**), and **1 Corinthians 14:33b–35** appears to further limit their participation (see NTRF.org for help with this topic).²⁸

Children: The New Testament indicates that children were present with their parents in worship. For example, Paul intended some of his letters to be read aloud to the entire church (**Col 4:16**). Had children not been present in the meeting, they would not have heard Paul’s instruction to them (**Eph 6:1–3**; see also **Mt 19:13–15**; **Lk 2:41–50**; **Acts 21:5**). It is better for children to remain with their parents in worship rather than to be segregated in a children’s church.

A young child who begins to cry loudly in the meeting should be removed by a parent until he has been quieted. Having a room designated for this purpose is beneficial. Some parents will be oblivious to this need. In such cases, the leadership must speak to the parents in private to enlist their cooperation in controlling their children. Older children should be taught to sit still or to play silently on the floor to avoid being disruptive.

False Expectations: New people will invariably come to participatory worship with preconceived notions. For example, some will want to have a moving worship experience or to sing only the great hymns of the faith. Others will exclusively associate praise songs with heartfelt worship, expect dramatic healings to take place, or desire an emotional presentation of the Gospel. When their expectations are not met, disappointment and discontent are the result. Church leaders need to be aware of this and take steps to help people to have biblical expectations of the meetings. A description of a typical church meeting could be posted on the church website. In each service, a brief statement could be made about the way that the church meeting will be conducted, and a bulletin could be provided to visitors so that they would know what to expect.

Regenerate Membership: The ability to have participatory worship assumes a regenerate church membership. This requires church discipline. The Reformers felt that one of the characteristics of a true church was church discipline.²⁹ The wonder of the gospel is that

²⁸“Women: Silent in Church?”

²⁹ *Belgic Confession*, Article 29.

provision is made for the sinning brother who cannot find his way to repentance on his own. The grace of a loving congregation will help him be restored to full fellowship.³⁰

Three Phases: We recommend three phases for every Lord's Day meeting. The first phase might be participatory: sharing, praying, and singing, followed by a short break. The second could be the lesson brought by an elder or brother qualified to teach. The third phase would be the Lord's Supper or *Agapé*. Of course, the order of the phases could be changed to meet the needs of the fellowship.

Sample Bulletin

Gathering

10:15–10:30: Arrive and Settle In

- Meet people, enjoy a cup of coffee, and find a seat.

10:30–11:15: Participatory Worship

- First-century church meetings were characterized by “each one has” (1Co 14:26). Accordingly, believers in good standing with the church are free to use their spiritual gifts to build up the gathered saints through songs, short testimonies, Scripture readings, exhortations, or praise.

11:15–11:30: Short Break

- Stand up, stretch your legs, refresh your coffee, and greet someone.

11:30–12:15: Lesson

- An integral part of our participatory worship is the in-depth teaching of God's Word by an elder or brother with the gift of teaching.

12:30–2:30: Lords' Supper/Agapé Feast

- The early church celebrated the Lord's Supper weekly as a literal meal. This holy meal is a wonderful time of edification through fellowship. Central are the bread and wine, which symbolize Jesus' death on the cross to pay for our sins. The single cup and single loaf symbolize unity. An enacted prayer, the Lord's Supper reminds us of Jesus' promise to return and eat it again with us at the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb.

Come, Lord Jesus!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Taken as a whole, what statements in 1 Corinthians 14 indicate that early church meetings were participatory?
2. Suppose 1 Corinthians 14:26 is a criticism of the Corinthian church. What is the significance of the inspired solution being a regulation of participation rather than a prohibition of participation?
3. Why is it important for everything that is said in the church meeting to be edifying? *See 1 Corinthians 14:1–25.*
4. According to 1 Corinthians 14 and Hebrews 10:24–25, what are some of the guiding principles for participatory church meetings?

³⁰ Matthew 18:15–22.

5. What role should pastors play in participatory meetings? *See 1 Timothy 1:3–5, 3:5, 4:11–14, 5:17, 6:2b; 2 Timothy 4:1–2; Titus 2:1, 2:15.*
6. What can be done if, week after week, few saints share anything of significance in participatory worship?
7. Why would the absence of charismatic gifts not nullify the general principle of participatory church meetings?
8. What is the Lord commanding in 1 Corinthians 14:37?
9. According to Acts 2:42, Acts 14:26–28, and 1 Timothy 4:13, what are some appropriate contributions to a church meeting?
10. What advantages does a smaller congregation have over a larger one regarding participatory worship?

NTRF.org has audio, video, and a teacher's discussion guide on worship.

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