Reexamining the First Principles of the Local Church

Weeks 6 + 7: Becoming All Things to All Men (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

At the beginning of 2026, the elders of WPBC began a study of "first principles" of the local church. Why does the church exist? How does God want it to be structured? What should our worship services look like? We spent a good part of the year looking at the Bible's answers questions like these, and this Wednesday series is an outgrowth of that. This week we consider our witness and what it means to 'become all things to all men.'

01: First Principles We've Identified So Far

Preliminary Principles and Core Presuppositions

1. We want WPBC to be a lighthouse for the Lord Jesus in North County. God is working in peoples' hearts all around us, which means that we have a tremendous opportunity to be an oasis of the living water of God's Word in this community.

2. God blesses His way, not man's way. He blesses the biblical blueprint, not our skill or creativity (Acts 2:41, 47, 6:7; Eph 4:11–16).

3. The right starting point is not what people want in a church, but what Christ wants in His church, because He is the Lord of the church (Rev 1–3).

4. We can't assume on generalities—e.g., '*The Bible says do all to the glory of God, and that's what we're doing!*' Biblical faithfulness is not the result of good intentions (let alone assumptions), but of the intentional effort to tie everything we do to the Word of God.

5. The essentials can never be taken for granted. We never get to a point where we can move on from the basics. The most stable and successful institutions—whether it's a family, a business or a church—are those that are most solidly grounded in what's most important.

Principles from the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20)

1. The overwhelming bulk of Great Commission effort is found in teaching disciples (lit. "learners") the whole counsel of God, which takes place in the local church. Therefore, the local church exists to be an educational institution, designed to teach believers the Word of God.

2. Following that, the church exists solely for the truth of God's Word. Many things can be found in the church that can be found in other human organizations—like social welfare, relationships, and even entertainment. But because the church exists for the truth, all those things are incidental by default, secondary at best, and must exist in the service of the truth. In the church, they do not and must not ever exist for their own sake.

Principles from Acts 6:1–7

1. The local church exists to educate; it exists for biblical instruction. At all costs and no matter the expense, the ministry of the Word in the local church must remain the priority.

2. The elders are the church's leaders, and their responsibilities are prayer, the ministry of the Word, facilitating ministry, and establishing policy in the local church.

3. Deacons are biblically-qualified servants[1] who are responsible for managing the church's material assets to ensure A) that its ministries continue and B) that the ultimate priority of the ministry of the Word is protected.

4. The church is not a collection of competing factions or special interest groups. The church is one body—the body of Christ—and the Lord's people are members of it and of one another.

Principles from 1 Corinthians 14

1. The singular priority in the local assembly is corporate edification—the growth of the whole church in their understanding of the truth.

2. Following that, explicit doctrinal clarity must drive every aspect of corporate worship. Paul strictly prohibits ambiguity and unintelligibility in the corporate gathering.

3. Congregational worship is "congregational"—it aims to include the entire congregation 'so that all may learn and be built up.' The corporate assembly is about "us," not "me."

4. When corporate edification is made the priority, love, orderliness, and peace are governing in the worship service. By contrast, the imposition of 'personal edification' (one's own personal concerns and preferences) on the corporate assembly undermines the edification of everyone and is unloving, chaotic, and evil.

5. Secondarily:

    - Because 'the church is for the church,' the corporate assembly has evangelistic value when it is unconcerned with evangelism and only concerned with corporate edification.

    - Anything that happens in the worship service should happen 'one at a time.' Whatever "we" are doing, "we" need to be doing it together and not over one another 'so that all may learn.'

    - Elders are the leaders of the local church and must lead in the local assembly.

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[1] Acts 6:3b; see also 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

02: Becoming All Things to All Men (1 Corinthians 9:19–23)

While this passage (unlike the others we've looked at) doesn't have to do with corporate worship, it does show us how Paul went about his witness as a church planter in the multi-cultural world of the ancient Mediterranean. The reality is that every local church is going to be in a specific place among a certain culture, and Paul was sensitive to that reality, which is why he 'became all things to all men.'

For the past half century, contemporary American Christianity has taken that to mean that, "*Unless we become like the rockers (or the rappers, or cowboys, etc.), we won't win them*," or, "*We need to make church appealing to people who don't like church so we can get them in and get them saved*." This principle is called "contextualization," and its basic premise according to modern understanding is that cultural appropriation is necessary for an effective Christian witness.

Paul was certainly accommodating of his cultural surroundings. But when we consider how he went about that, what we find is not cultural appropriation, but self-denial. Paul never used his liberty for self-indulgence or robed his own infatuation with the culture in the guise of "evangelism." Instead, Paul constantly denied his rights—in whatever way the circumstances called for—in order to prevent things that don't matter from becoming primary points of offense. He was never under the illusion that he could accessorize the Word of God to make it more effective or more palatable. Rather, he was consumed with making sure that he and his own personal preferences never became a hinderance to the Word of God, which alone is able to save and change.

1. What are some examples of "contextualization" in the American church over the past five or six decades?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. In the context, what does Paul mean when he says that 'he became all things to all men' (v.22)?

3. What do we know about the city of Corinth that evidently made Paul's exercise of his right to financial support a stumbling block in that church?

4. Read and compare Acts 21:17–26, Galatians 2:1–5, and Galatians 2:11–14. What are the inconsequential externals in view in each of these passages? What are Paul's responses to each?

5. Based on the passages from the last question, what do we learn about Paul's view of the 'all things to all men' principle?

6. Based on Paul's instruction and example, what kinds of issues must be on the chopping block, and under what circumstances?

7. Based on Paul's instruction and example, what's wrong with some of the common misconceptions of 'becoming all things to all men'?

8. Are there any external 'hills' do that you think Paul would be willing die on? Which ones, and why?

9. **Bonus:** It's obvious from v.1 that ch.9 is part of a bigger argument that starts back in ch.8. What is that argument, and how does it relate to Paul's point in ch.14?