Reexamining the First Principles of the Local Church

Week 8: Review

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 happen in our worship services? We spent most of the year looking at the Bible's answers to questions like these, and this study is an outgrowth of that effort. Next week we'll start thinking through the subject of music in the church, but this week we'll do a review and consider some questions for application.

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.

Principles from 1 Corinthians 9:19–22 ("All Things to All Men")

1. Cultural appropriation is a hindrance to the work of God in peoples' lives, not a necessary prerequisite to it. It is not possible to accessorize the Word of God in order to make it more effective; it is only possible to get out of its way.

2. Each cultural setting will include external customs, practices, etc. that are not sin and that don't inherently matter. We must work hard to prevent those kinds of things from becoming hinderances to the truth of God's Word.

3. We must be ruthless with ourselves when it comes to denying our own rights and preferences so that peripheral things never become primary points of offense.

03: Questions for Personal Application

Action without understanding is not God's will for human beings, especially his people. We need a clear view of what we should do and why if we're to avoid operating on assumptions or instincts. Principles have necessary implications—they demand that we do "B" because of "A." In this light, there is no such thing as abstract theology; all of God's truth is designed to shape life and make us better for Christ. It's been said that the goal of theology is better Christians, not smarter Christians. Here are some questions for personal application based on our 'first principles.'

1. What are we saying when we say that the "the inspired [and inerrant] Word of God … is the complete, infallible, sufficient and final authority for faith and practice"?[2] To put it another way, what truths are contained in the idea of the authority of Scripture?

2. What does it look like practically to submit to the authority of Scripture?

3. We've talked a lot about the danger of unexamined beliefs and the need to avoid assuming we're right. How does the Bible itself warn us about that danger? Why is this so important?

4. Which principle from this study has most challenged an idea you previously held about the church? What in the passages we've studied caused you to reconsider it?

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[2] WPBC Bylaws and Statement of Faith, Section 3.1, "The Authority of the Bible."

5. How would we recognize whether the ministry of the Word is truly central to the life of a church (as opposed to simply occupying a prominent place in its schedule)?

6. How has humility shown up in each of the passages we've looked at? Why is humility so important in the local church, and what does it look like in action?

7. How do we distinguish between biblical commands and principles—which are nonnegotiable—and preferences or personal convictions which differ from person to person?

8. How should we approach biblical principles? How should we approach preferences or personal convictions, both our own and those of others?

9. How do we distinguish between church practices that 'edify' us personally vs. those that build up the whole body?

10. The application of biblical commands and principles is often "a judgment call," where wisdom, discernment, humility, and the skilled use of Scripture are needed. What responsibilities do the elders have in that dynamic? What about the congregation? What should Christians do when their preferences or convictions differ from elders' decisions?

11. In light of our 'first principles,' what is one important way that God wants you to change personally? What is something you can do better or differently?