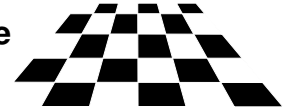


1. Timeless Apostolic Traditions of Church Practice (New Testament Patterns)



Introduction: From a Jewish perspective, there are really only **two types** of people in the world: Jew and Gentile. No matter that there exist Asian, African and Anglo; there are still only two types of people: Jew or Gentile. Similarly, when you boil it all down, there are really only two ways you can “do” church, just two ways to set up a church, two ways to organize a church:

PPT>>> The way the apostles did it.

PPT>>> Some other way. Most people opt for this second choice. And they are very creative in what they dream up.

PPT>>> Like Frank Sinatra, you too can sing, “I did it my way”.

Fact: It is obvious that the church of history has had little regard for the way the apostles did things. The modern church has not just added to the traditions of the New Testament, in many cases it does the exact opposite. This lesson is about apostolic traditions: *Who cares? Is it obsolete? Is it irrelevant? Is it merely quaint history? Is it merely a snapshot of the church in diapers?*

Example: Suppose a newly planted, first century church in Alexandria, Egypt wrote a letter to the apostles over in Jerusalem. In this letter was a series of questions about church life:

- **What** should we **do** when we meet as a church? *Genuflect? Light candles? Hear a homily?*
- **Why** do we meet? *To celebrate the mass? To hear preaching? To have a worship service?*
- **How often** should we meet? *Daily? Weekly? Bi-weekly?*
- Does it matter **where** we meet? *How big a meeting should we aim for? Roman atrium sized? Jewish synagogue sized? Pagan temple sized?*
- What type of church **government** should we have? *Elder rule? Congregational? Episcopal? Presbyterian?*
- What should we look for in a church **leader**? *Can sisters be elders? Must he be a seminary graduate?*
- Do we **need** leaders?
- Does it matter how often we eat the **Lord’s Supper**?
- **How** should we eat the Lord’s Supper (what **form** should it take)?

Suppose it were possible for us to write a letter to the original apostles, asking them about church life. Do you think they would answer back that they expected us to follow their examples regarding church practice, or would they encourage us to follow a way of our own devising? (Rhetorical).

Philosophical Question: *How would the apostles have answered the letter? (Rhetorical).*

- 1) *Would they have written that each church was free to do whatever it wanted to do? That each church should just pray and follow the Holy Spirit's leading? That each congregation should be unique and different? That they should be free of outside influence?*
- 2) *Or, might the apostles have answered with very specific instructions? With a particular way of doing things? With a definite agenda? With very particular guidelines?*

The Problem: A question faced by the church of history concerns exactly what should be done with the New Testament patterns for church life.

- Should we follow these patterns?*
- Are New Testament patterns optional or imperative?*
- Are they merely interesting history or should they constitute some kind of normative church practice?*

This problem is compounded because the New Testament has almost nothing to say by way of direct command concerning ecclesiology. It is a fact that most Christians dismiss New Testament patterns as optional.

PPT>>> Fee and Stuart, in *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, correctly state: "Our assumption, along with many others, is that *unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way*" (p. 97, first edition).

We agree that we are not to be monkey-see, monkey-do readers of the Bible. No one, for instance, would advocate following Jephthah's example in Judges 11:29ff. The question for us is whether or not Scripture "explicitly tells us" that we "must" copy the patterns for church described in the New Testament.

Most churches follow some of the patterns in the New Testament, but not all. The question is, why not? (Rhetorical). That which is argued for in this study is consistency. We propose that the apostles had a definite, very particular way they organized churches, and they intended for all churches to follow these same apostolic patterns, even today. The following study is evidence for our proposal.

Perspective: The paramount reason to adopt apostolic traditions is to honor Christ as the Head, the Leader, the King, the Bridegroom, besides being Lamb and Redeemer. If Jesus is not the One we are revolving around, all scriptural practice is only a false display without real spiritual life. We are called to be His hands, feet and mouth in this world, doing what He initiates. Without Christ as the center, anything we do would be just legalism and lifeless form.

PPT>>>

— I. Holding to New Testament patterns is **LOGICAL** —

****In **1 Corinthians 4:14-17**, why did Paul send Timothy to Corinth? Paul wanted Timothy to model and thus remind the Corinthians of Paul's life-style of humility and faithfulness as a servant of Christ, 4:17.

What is the basic command in 1 Corinthians 4:16?

In 1 Corinthians 4:17b, what was Paul's way of life in Christ consistent with? It was consistent with ("agrees with") what Paul taught. There was integrity.

PPT>>> Truth: It is an engineering axiom that "form follows function." **What does this mean?** It means that what something looks like will be determined by what you want it to do.

PPT>>> Example: If my function is to sell **fertilizer**

PPT>>> Then my form will be to call on **farmers**

PPT>>> Not to call on **ballet studios!**

1. How can "form follows function" be seen at work in Paul's ministry as described in 1 Corinthians 4:16-17? Paul's way of life (form) was in agreement with what he taught (function) everywhere in every church. There was a uniformity of practice that grew out of Paul's teachings. His belief determined his behavior. His doctrine determined his duty.

Logical Parallel Application:

2. How can the axiom *form follows function* be applied to the way that the apostles first set up and organized churches? Just as Paul's way of life (form) grew out of what he taught (function), so too the apostles' beliefs about the **function** of the church would naturally have affected the way they organized churches (the **form** of the church). Thus, we argue that (see PPT):

PPT>>> The function of a New Testament church is best carried out by the New Testament form of the church.

3. What uniformity of church practice could be derived from 1 Corinthians 4:16-17? The immediate context concerns Paul's faithfulness in service and his humility as an apostle. Though the direct import of 1 Corinthians 4 is far afield from church practice, to also imitate the apostles' ways regarding church life would be a wise choice for any fellowship.

****Why, according to **Titus 1:5**, did Paul leave Titus in Crete?

PPT>>> NIV **Titus 1:5** The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished. . .

4. What does Titus 1:5 imply about uniformity of practice in the early church? See also 1 Corinthians 11:34. Titus 1 is a passage that does deal directly with church practice. It concerns the appointment of qualified elders in every city.

The Point: It is evident from Titus 1:5 that the apostles did indeed have a definite way they wanted things done. It was not left up to each individual church to find its own way of doing things! There was a standard for what was crooked versus straight, for unfinished versus finished.

PPT>>> 1 Corinthians 11:34 The rest I will set in order when I come” (KJV, italics mine).

1 Corinthians 11:34 occurs at the end of a passage about the practice of the Lord’s Supper, another church life topic. There was obviously some kind of order, pattern, or tradition that was followed in organizing the churches. Crooked things needed to be straightened out. The unfinished needed to be finished. There was order versus out of order regarding church practice.

PPT>>> J. L. Dagg, the first Southern Baptist theologian who ever really wrote anything, a founding member of First Baptist Church of Atlanta and professor of theology at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, wrote in 1858 that: “they (the Apostles) have taught us by example how to organize and govern churches. We have no right to reject their instruction and captiously insist that nothing but positive command shall bind us. Instead of choosing to walk in a way of our own devising, we should take pleasure to walk in the footsteps of those holy men from whom we have received the word of life . . . respect for the Spirit by which they were led should induce us to prefer their modes of organization and government to such as our inferior wisdom might suggest” (*Manual of Church Order*, p. 84-86).

Transition: Not only is holding to apostolic traditions (I.) logical, it is also:

PPT>>> — II. Holding to apostolic traditions is PRAISEWORTHY —

****In **1 Corinthians 11:2**, why did Paul praise the Corinthians?

What does the word “everything” (1Co 11:2) mean? “Everything” means all that exists, or as in this context, all that pertains to the subject (Webster).

Does this mean we all need to be tent makers (11:2)? No; of course not.

When Paul wrote “everything” (1Co 11:2), what did he have in mind?

How might “everything” (11:2) apply to church order? It suggests that Paul’s intended application was larger than just the exhortation found in 10:31-11:1 (bringing glory to God). He is now about to move on to a new topic: Divine Order or Head Coverings. This is very much a church practice issue. 1 Corinthians 11 -14 is all about church practice, church meetings.

PPT>>>

6. In 1 Corinthians 11:2, what is the general difference between “teachings” (NIV) and “traditions” (ESV)? Do a word study.

PPT>>> The regular Greek word for “teaching” is *didaké* (basis for “didactic”), and means something that is taught, a precept or doctrine.

PPT>>> **Example: NAS Acts 2:42** . . . they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching (*didaché*) . . .

PPT>>> “X” — But *didaké* is **not** the word used here in 1 Corinthians 11:2.

PPT>>> Instead, *paradosis* is used. It means tradition. Thus, the ESV has “traditions” here instead of “teachings” (NIV).

PPT>>> **Tradition defined.** In English, a tradition is usually thought of as a custom or way of doing things that is handed down.

PPT>>> Webster's says it is an inherited pattern of thought or action.

PPT>>> The Greek word for tradition, *paradosis*, means:

PPT>>> “that which is handed down” (be it information or custom, BAGD, p. 615).

PPT>>> it can also be a 2.) teaching that is handed down.

PPT>>> **1. Practice.** This same Greek word *paradosis* (in verb form) is used in **1 Corinthians 11:23** in regard to the tradition of the Lord's Supper (that it was “passed on”).

NIV **1 Corinthians 11:23** I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you . . .

PPT>>> **2. Teaching.** *Paradosis* can also refer to a teaching that is passed on. *Paradosis* was a technical term in Judaism for oral transmission of religious instruction.

PPT>>> **Summary**

That which is handed over could be:

- 1.) The tradition of a certain custom or way of doing things (such as Lord's Supper).
- 2.) The tradition of a certain teaching (as in Judaism)

Question: Which is it here, in our passage?

PPT>>> In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Gordon Fee pointed out that although the Greek word for tradition, *paradosis*, is “a technical term in Judaism for oral transmission of religious instruction. In this case it almost certainly does not refer to ‘teachings’ (as it does in 15:3), but to the ‘traditions’ that have to do with worship” (*New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 499). Indeed, chapter 11 begins a long section on church practice (chapters 11, 12, 13, 14).

What do the words “even as” (11:2) indicate about the degree of their compliance with Paul’s traditions? They adhered to every iota; it was sort of a photocopy effect! Paul praised them for holding to his traditions “just as” (*kathos*) he passed them on to them. The apostles evidently designed for the churches to mimic the traditions (inherited patterns) that they had established. The particular issue dealt with in 1 Corinthians 11 is a woman’s head covering.

PPT>>>

7. What application could be drawn from the fact that the word “traditions” (11:2) is in the plural?

PPT>>> Paul had in mind more than the one tradition of head coverings.

PPT>>> He was pleased that the church held to all of his traditions for church practice.

The same word (*paradosis*) used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:2 is used by Jesus in **Matthew 15:1-3** when He said to the Pharisees:

PPT>>> NIV **Matthew 15:2** **Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?**

PPT>>> Jesus blasted the tradition of the Pharisees

PPT>>> Paul blessed the Corinthians for following the traditions of an apostle.

8. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for holding to their traditions (Mt 15), but Paul praised the church for holding to his traditions (1Co 11). Why the difference?

PPT>>> Some Jewish traditions broke the command of God.

PPT>>> All apostolic traditions are consistent with the commands of Jesus.

9. Why is it important to make a distinction between apostolic traditions (found in the New Testament) and the later traditions of the church fathers (found in history)? Which should be given preference? Why?

PPT>>> **Disclaimer:** We are *not* herein advocating the supposed apostolic tradition found in church history as claimed by Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism.

PPT>>> Instead, we promote *only* those apostolic traditions that can be found in the pages of the New Testament.

PPT>>> It is our privilege to leave the muddied water of church history and drink at the pure spring water of inspired New Testament writings.

10. Key Idea: Based on 1 Corinthians 11:2, what attitude did the apostles have regarding churches following their way of doing things?

PPT>>> **The Paradigm Principle.** Mosaic legislation was **paradigmatic** in nature. It was **case law, law by example**. Only a few, sample, legal examples were recorded by Moses. The believer was expected to apply those case studies to other areas of life not specifically mentioned. For instance, the corners of fields were to be left unharvested for the poor to gather and eat. Nothing was said about figs. **Does this mean that a wheat farmer alone was burdened with feeding the poor, but that the man with a fig orchard could harvest every last fig?** Certainly not; every farmer, regardless of the crop, was to leave a similar portion of his harvest to meet the needs of the poor.

11. Mosaic Law was paradigmatic in nature. How would the paradigm principle apply to the commands in the New Testament to follow specific apostolic traditions (2Th 2:15, 3:6)?

PPT>>> We argue that adherence to apostolic tradition is paradigmatic in nature.

PPT>>> If we observe that the apostles were pleased when churches followed specific traditions, then we are expected to apply that example to other patterns we see modeled by the apostles in their establishment of churches.

Transition: Holding to Apostolic Traditions is **1) Logical, 2) Praise-Worthy, and now 3) we see that:**

PPT>>> — **III. Holding to apostolic traditions is to be UNIVERSAL** —

******In 1 Corinthians 11:16, how did Paul quiet those inclined to be contentious?**

12. What does 1 Corinthians 11:16 indicate in principle about uniformity of practice in New Testament churches?

Note: The point is that Paul expected all churches to be doing the same thing. Just to realize that one was “different” was argument enough to silence opposition. (It is beyond the scope of this study to deal with the particulars of head coverings.)

****Based on **1 Corinthians 14:33b-34**, what was true in all congregations? Without dealing here with this passage's specific meaning, notice how Paul again appealed to a universal pattern that existed in all the churches as a basis for conformity.

Note: As with 1 Corinthians 11, this passage deals also directly with church practice issues.

13. What does 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34 reveal about uniformity of practice in New Testament churches?

****What is the answer to the two questions in **1 Corinthians 14:36**?
How does 14:36 constitute a chide?

14. How does Paul's chide in 1 Corinthians 14:36 reveal that a uniformity of practice was the norm among New Testament churches? The chide was for doing something different than what the other churches were doing. Evidently all the churches were expected to follow the same patterns in their ecclesiology.

PPT>>> **Jim Elliot**, missionary martyr, wrote, "The pivot point hangs on whether or not God has revealed a universal pattern for the church in the New Testament. If He has not, then anything will do so long as it works. But I am convinced that nothing so dear to the heart of Christ as His Bride should be left without explicit instructions as to her corporate conduct. I am further convinced that the 20th century has in no way simulated this pattern in its method of 'churching' a community . . . it is incumbent upon me, if God has a pattern for the church, to find and establish that pattern, at all costs" (*Shadow of The Almighty: Life and Testimony of Jim Elliot*)

Transition: Not only is holding to apostolic traditions 1) logical, 2) praise-worthy, 3) to be universal but also:

PPT>>> **IV. Holding to apostolic traditions could potentially bring
GOD'S PEACEFUL PRESENCE**

****According to **Philippians 4:8-9** how can a church get into a position for God to be with them?

PPT>>> The Philippians were to put into practice "what" (4:9) they learned, received, heard or saw from Paul.

What is the general context of Philippians 4:8-9? Life-style issues: putting others first, holding forth the light of the gospel, rejoicing despite our circumstances, boasting in Christ rather than our self righteousness, etc.

15. How might Philippians 4:9 be applied today with respect to the way we see that Paul organized churches? The primary application in context concerned imitating Christ's humility, putting others first, and rejoicing in the Lord. **By extension would this not also include the way we see in the New Testament that Paul organized churches?**

PPT>>> Watchman Nee in *The Church And The Work: Rethinking The Work*, wrote, "Acts is the 'genesis' of the church's history, and the Church in the time of Paul is the 'genesis' of the Spirit's work . . . we must return to 'the beginning.' Only what God has set forth as our example in the beginning is the eternal Will of God. It is the Divine standard and our pattern for all time . . ."

PPT>>> God has revealed His Will, not only by giving orders, but by having certain things done in His church, so that in the ages to come others might simply look at the pattern and know His will" (p. 8-9).

Transition: Holding to Apostolic Tradition is 1) Logical, 2) Praise-Worthy, 3) To Be Universal, 4) Brings God's Peaceful Presence, and finally:

PPT>>> — V. Holding to apostolic tradition is actually **COMMANDED**

****What were the Thessalonians commanded to do (2Th 2:15)?

16. In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, what does the word "teachings" (NIV) or "traditions" (NASV) mean? *Do a word study.* This is the same Greek word, *paradosis*, used in 1 Corinthians 11:2. The Thessalonians were specifically commanded to follow, to hold to, the "traditions" of the apostles, whether received by mouth or by letter (whether oral or written).

Context: The overall context of 2 Thessalonians 2 refers to their *teaching* traditions about end time events, not church practice. **Yet would it not also apply in principle to their traditions regarding church order, as patterned in the New Testament?** The word "traditions" is again in the plural; the author clearly had more in view than merely the one tradition about prophecy. Later, in 3:6-10, it was used with reference to life-style issues. The command applies to all their traditions.

Application: Today we do not have any apostolic information received by mouth, but we do have their letters. We are to hold to the traditions found in those letters. This would include both their theology and their practice.

17. Many believers feel that while apostolic traditions are interesting, following them is never commanded. What does 2 Thessalonians 2:15 indicate about this issue? Is adherence to the traditions commanded or suggested? *See 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-7.* Significantly, it is clearly commanded!

****What "traditions" (NASV) did the apostles pass on in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13? The specific context here refers to gainfully working versus being idle and lazy, but the principle still holds true: the apostles generally wanted the churches to follow, to hold to, to mimic, their traditions (in work ethics, end time events, and church practice).

Example: Roger Williams, founder not only of Rhode Island but also of the very first Baptist church in North America (1600s), believed that churches should strive for as near approximate as possible to New Testament forms and ordinances (*Liberty of Conscience*, p. 106). This belief led Williams to resign as an Anglican clergyman and also to found Rhode Island on the New Testament pattern of a separation between church and state.

18. What gave the twelve apostles authority to establish patterns that all churches are obliged to follow? See *John 13:20, 15:20, Acts 1:1-3, 2:42*. They were handpicked by Jesus to uniquely represent Him in a way that no one else ever since has. To reject the teachings of the twelve was to reject the teachings of Jesus.

Note: More will be studied about the Twelve in a later lesson.

PPT>>> What conclusion can be draw about God’s desire for the modern church to follow New Testament patterns for church practice?

Summary: If the Bible directly commands something, then we obviously ought to follow that command. *Significantly, the Bible commands adherence to the traditions of the apostles.* If, however, the Bible is silent about something (i.e., there is neither command nor pattern to follow), then we have the freedom to do whatever suits us (following the wisdom of the Holy Spirit).

The real question thus is not, “Do we *have* to do things the way they were done in the New Testament?” The question is: “Why would we want to do things any other way?!” The burden of explanation and concerned questions ought to fall upon those who deviate from New Testament patterns, not upon those who seek to keep them.

Exception Clause: Are there ever good reasons for going against New Testament pattern? Yes, we believe that there are. Just as Jesus revealed that the Sabbath is made for man and not man for the Sabbath, so also the examples found in the New Testament are there for the sake of the church, not vise versa. Moses told the Jews to observe a Saturday Sabbath; violating that command was a capital offense. Yet Jesus said it was always appropriate to do good on the Sabbath. If your ox is in ditch, it is acceptable to work on the Sabbath in order to get the ox out; so too with New Testament patterns. We are generally to keep the patterns laid down by the apostles. However, there may be extenuating circumstances that argue for not keeping some of the patterns. For instance, there was a traditional church pastor who, being thoroughly convinced of the importance of holding to apostolic traditions, left the traditional pastorate in order to start and pastor house churches. Ten years and several house churches later, he returned to the traditional pastorate. He explained that in his setting, house church was seen as counter-cultural. Many people, lost and saved alike, assigned house churches a cult-like status. The vast majority of people he did manage to attract were anti-authority and anti-doctrine. He found it impossible to build a

church with such “disciples.” He went back to a more conventional way of doing church in order to more effectively reach the lost and truly make disciples.

PPT>>> Remember Fee & Stuart’s statement about New Testament patterns? Their latest edition adds a significant phrase, not found in the first edition. It now reads, *“unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way —*

PPT>>> *unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way”* (p. 106, second edition). Their modified position allows for the importance of holding to apostolic tradition.

Caution #1: Beware of making patterns out of **silence**. Some feel that not only must we follow New Testament patterns, but we that we also do not have the freedom to do anything that was not done by the early church. They believe that if a practice is not found in the New Testament, then we can’t do it; it is forbidden. For instance, if the New Testament is silent about using musical instruments, then we must not use them. This is also known as the regulative principle. We disagree with this approach. **First**, the lack of mention of a practice is not proof that the early church did not practice it! **Second**, this negative approach is essentially a form of legalism and leads easily to a critical and judgmental spirit toward others. Instead of seeking to positively follow what clearly are New Testament patterns, advocates of this negative hermeneutic are known for all the things that they are against (anti-this, anti-that). **Third**, if regulative principle is the right approach, then why did Jesus participate in the festival of Hanukkah and synagogue system, both of which were extra-biblical, inter-testament historical developments?

Caution #2: Beware of developing an attitude of **pride or legalism**. Darryl Erkel has pointed out the “danger of making distinctive New Testament patterns a form of legalism wherein we begin to look down or distance ourselves from our fellow brothers because they don't quite do it the way that we think it should be done. We should always be careful to not give the impression to others that their church is false or that God can't use their church because they're not following apostolic patterns as closely as we are. That is nothing but sheer pride! On the other hand, we ought to look for opportunities to respectfully and tactfully demonstrate that there is a better way — one which is more conducive to the spiritual growth of God's people — for the **function** of the New Testament church is best carried out by the New Testament **form** of the church!” Further, Jesus pointed out that man is made for the Sabbath, not the Sabbath for man. His point was that there were justified reasons for breaking the Sabbath (an ox in the ditch, doing acts of mercy, the work of the priests). The same would hold true for apostolic traditions. Apostolic traditions were made for the church, not the church for apostolic traditions!

19. The Roman world is gone forever. What is the difference between holding to apostolic traditions and mindlessly copying everything seen in the New Testament (wearing sandals, writing on parchment, studying by oil lamps, wearing togas, etc.)? Beware of making patterns out of things that are **onetime events.** For instance, the Christian communalism of Acts 6 was a onetime event for a single church. It is an option for any believers of any age, but it is neither a command nor a New Testament pattern. The same could be said of Paul's vow in Acts not to cut his hair. The key is to focus in on New Testament religious practices, especially (but not only) those that went against the culture of their day. For instance, if the Romans had electric lighting and if instead of using electric lights the Christians lit their meetings by oil lamps, then that should get our attention! By way of contrast, there was nothing religious nor out of the ordinary in wearing togas, so there is no need for us to do so today. Another example would be the use of guitars in modern meetings; since they did not use them in New Testament times, does this mean that we should not either? Since guitars were not yet invented, the real question is whether they used instruments at all. The word for "psalm" is *psalmos* and means "song of praise"; the original meaning of *psallo* was "pluck, play" (a stringed instrument), a meaning that persisted into the second century A.D. (BAGD, p. 891). If instruments were not used in New Testament church meetings, then arguably they went against their culture in not using them and thus neither should we. If, however, instruments were used, then a guitar would be perfectly acceptable today.

20. Jesus washed His disciples' feet. The Jerusalem church practiced communalism. How can we determine what is and is not an intended to be an apostolic tradition? The tradition of the Twelve will: **1)** Originate from the original twelve apostles, **2)** Apply to all New Testament churches, **3)** Cross cultural boundaries & transcend language differences, **4)** Pass from spiritual generation to spiritual generation, **5)** Have a reasonable, obvious purpose (it is not mindless aping).

21. Read the chapter entitled, "Apostolic Traditions: Obsolete?" in *House Church: Simple, Strategic, Scriptural*. What are some of the apostolic traditions for church practice that are often neglected today?

PPT>>> What are some apostolic traditions that should still be followed today? (Feel free to disagree).

PPT>>> **1. Communion**

- a. An actual meal ~ rehearsal dinner for the marriage banquet of the Lamb. It is a sacred, covenant feast, a holy meal
- b. A time of fellowship and encouragement
- c. Celebrated weekly
- d. The main reason for gathering each week

PPT>>> **2. Worship Services**

- a. Style: *Participatory* ~ not a service at all
- b. Goal: *Mutual edification* ~ not just worship
- c. Emphasis: *One Another* ~ not one man

PPT>>> 3. Church Government

Elder-led congregational consensus

- Not elder rule
- Not majority rule
- Not unanimity

PPT>>> 4. Smaller Churches (not mega churches)

There were no mega churches in the early church. New Testament churches met in private homes (Ro 16:5, Col 4:15, Phlm 2) where everyone could know everyone else. Everything in the New Testament was written to a church that met in a home. There is nothing magic about meeting in a home per se; it's what happens there that matters, and it happens best in a smaller church. The New Testament norm is many smaller churches rather than a few mega churches.

However, whereas we should not think too big, neither should we think *too* small either. As with Goldilocks, it should be just the right size! We should be thinking in terms of scores of people in a single church: not just tens of people, but not hundreds and hundreds and certainly not thousands, either. The meeting room of the Lullingstone Villa house church in Kent, England (built during the Roman occupation) measured approximately 15' x 21'. An examination of floor plans in Pompeii shows typical atriums measuring 20' x 28'. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor measured six homes in Pompeii and Ephesus and found the average atrium to be 797 square feet. A house known to be host a church in Dura-Europos (in Syria) could, according to the Yale archaeologists who excavated it, seat 65 to 70 people.¹ Acts 1:15 records 120 believers assembled in the upper room. We don't know how many fit into their house churches, but there were enough to support qualified elders, send missionaries, support widows, make disciples and have quality teaching each week.

PPT>>> 5. Support for Full-Time Workers

Church reproduction and strengthening through the ministry of itinerant and local church workers (apostles, pastor-teachers, evangelists, etc.).

PPT>>> 6. Distinguish Church Meetings from Ministry Meetings

A distinction should be made between church meetings and ministry meetings (special times of ministry led by a few gifted people that are distinct from the regular church meeting).

Examples: large worship gatherings, teaching seminars, evangelistic meetings, etc.

PPT>>> Application: What we have argued for here is consistency. Most churches already follow some of these patterns, but not all.

PPT>>> Our question is, **Why not?**

PPT>>> This consistency is especially important since the apostles expected for all churches to follow their traditions "just as" (NIV) they were handed down.

Christ the Center: Of course, Jesus must be the center of a church or none of this will work anyway. It would blow apart! As He said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing.”

PPT>>> Alignment Example: A car with its front end out of alignment will still take its driver where he wants to go, but at a price: prematurely worn and damaged tires. Similarly, a church that neglects apostolic patterns is still a church, and much good can come from and through that church, but at a price. Damage is being done. At the least, blessings are being missed. More significantly, people are being hurt, damaged, worn out.

22. There is general consensus in scholarly circles, regardless of denomination, as to how the early church functioned. **What should we make of the fact that there is general scholarly consensus regarding the actual practice of the early church?** This consensus helps us to determine which basic practices were unquestionable parts of apostolic tradition.

PPT>>>

— Conclusions —

PPT>>> 1. God directs by **patterns** (traditions) as well as by precept (teaching).

PPT>>> 2. The church life patterns in the New Testament are **generally applicable** for the church in all ages and places.

PPT>>> 3. Apostolic traditions are **consistent** with apostolic teachings.

PPT>>> 4. The **most important** New Testament patterns are: the celebration of the Lord’s Supper weekly as an actual meal (rehearsal dinner for the marriage banquet of the Lamb!), participatory church meetings, elder-led congregational consensus and smallish churches rather than mega churches (scores of people not hundreds or thousands).

PPT>>> 5. Without **Christ at the center** of things, the patterns become legalism and death, a hollow form, an empty shell. We need the proper wine skin, but more importantly we need the wine. Both have their place. Either one without the other is problematic.

Other considerations:

Following New Testament patterns does not mean blindly **attempting to recreate Roman culture** (like wearing togas, writing on parchment, lighting by oil lamps, etc.). The issue here is church practice. There should be obvious reasons behind the practices being followed.

Following New Testament patterns **does not mean every church will be exactly alike** (cookie cutter). Certainly there will be similarity in the basics (see summary # 4 above), but there is also freedom within the boundaries of the form (like in music, food, clothing styles, etc.).

A word of balance: The early church was not nearly so program and building oriented as many traditional churches are. Because of this, some have mistakenly concluded that NTRF is against organization. Faithfulness to our Lord and His Word necessarily results in a church that follows God’s complete pattern for His people. We are not institutional, but we are to be organized. Following the traditions laid down by the apostles means that churches are to have definite leaders, regular and orderly meetings, active church discipline, and weekly Lord’s Supper celebrations.

23. How, exactly, should today's church view New Testament patterns of church practice? Are the traditions of the apostles just interesting history or should they constitute some kind of normative church practice? It seems evident that whatever was normative church practice for all the churches in the New Testament should be normative practice for churches today. It was precisely these patterns of ecclesiology that gave the New Testament church the dynamic that today's church has been missing for so long!

24. Some think it folly to try to recreate the "primitive" first-century church, since it was far from perfect. They assert that God expected His church to mature, to grow up, beyond the infancy stage. As much as anything, early believers are seen as examples of how not to function as a church. Besides, they argue, it is impossible to behave exactly like the first century church since we no longer have the original apostles with us. How would you respond to this argument?

How can the concerns expressed by the following quote be overcome? "I believe that there are potential problems in too-rigidly trying to mirror New Testament practice. As I see it, we risk 'majoring in the minors' despite the best of intentions . . ."

25. Why are historical church traditions so often given preference over New Testament historical traditions?

26. Does the church you fellowship with give careful attention to New Testament patterns, ignore them almost entirely, or select (cafeteria-style) which apostolic examples will be followed? How do you feel about this?

Practical Concerns: What do you do if you find yourself in a church that neglects New Testament patterns?

1. Do not get cynical, angry or bitter. Most believers are blissfully unaware of the importance of following New Testament patterns. Keeping the proper attitude and spirit is of paramount importance.
2. Keep quiet for a year or two until you get over the initial euphoria of having discovered a new truth. Take time to ground yourself in what the Bible teaches about the church. Calm down, and be sure you are clothed and in your right mind!
3. When you do finally speak to your church about this, talk privately, humbly, and respectfully to the leadership about your new understanding. Do not expect them to agree with you, especially at first, and maybe never. Nobody likes change, and the leaders will have a vested interest in the *status quo*. Further, pastors are by temperament conservative and like stability. Frankly, some seminary trained, full time pastors will look down on mere "laymen" (who lack professional training) and discount the truths that they discover in Scripture.

4. If the church leadership actually does listen and agrees to consider New Testament patterns, continue to be patient. Work with them, not against them! As long as there is hope for significant change, hang in there.
5. If, in the final analysis, the church will not consider adopting the patterns of the New Testament, then ask them to send you out to start a new work. Seek their blessing. Do not be factious or divisive. They are your brothers in Christ, not your enemies.
6. If they will not bless you in your efforts to begin a church, and if you are not content to stay with them, it is still important to leave quietly, not causing a ruckus. Doubtless your disappointment will be great, but it is critical to maintain a good attitude (1Pe 3:8-22). Remember that God is sovereign over all men. It is His church anyhow and He is not worried about a thing! Remember also that you have planted many seeds that may grow and bear fruit in the future.
7. Realize that not everyone is equally gifted to start or lead a church. You may be better served (and able to serve) by staying where you are already in fellowship or by seeking out an existing church that goes closer by New Testament patterns than the one you are currently involved with.

Finesse: Darryl Erkel has observed, "It's important to keep in mind that as believers under the New Covenant age, God does not always give us precise or exact commands of what and how we should always do things, but often chooses to give us general principles which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and some sanctified wisdom, we are to apply for the benefit of the church. Part of this may be due to the fact that God knew that His people would sometimes find themselves in unique situations which might possibly require a temporary shift in their practice. Thus, in His wisdom, God set forth general ecclesiological patterns and principles that the church would have to work out depending upon where they were and what threats confronted them."

**** = Ask this question before having someone read the text aloud; it introduces a new passage of Scripture.

Next Lesson: E-mail the next set of discussion questions out to the class (or print them up and hand them out at the end of this lesson). Ask them to consider the issues, answer the questions and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

Teacher Preparation: To help you prepare to teach this, go to www.sermonaudio.com/ntrf, go to our series on Early Church Practice and find this lesson.

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