

What is An Old School Church?

Matthew 28:16 Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them.

17 When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted.

18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

If we were to sit down and talk about all the different kinds of churches in the world we could define them by their government, we could talk about congregational or Episcopalian, or Presbyterian churches, or we could talk about their worship we could talk about liturgical churches, and charismatic churches, and Pentecostal churches, and traditional churches. We could go on and on, talking about all sorts of different churches, but ultimately I believe that there are only two different categories of churches –consumer driven churches and the bible driven churches. Now consumer driven churches are churches that like businesses are driven and directed by the **felt needs of the consumer**. So for instance, if we are trying to determine how we should go about worshipping God the first thing we need to determine is what do people want? What is popular? And then they attempt to tailor Christian worship along those lines. In the consumer model the gospel is often thought of as a product and the church as the marketing or delivery system.

Now we can find varieties of consumer driven churches in every age. These are the churches that took their directions from the surrounding culture and the desires of the people, regardless of whether they were found in the word. For instance, as the early church began to expand we begin to see the practice of syncretism. That is as Christianity moved into new areas they began to incorporate elements of pagan religions and systems in order to make Christianity popular and more easily consumed. And example of this is the church calendar. The New Testament doesn't command Christians to observe any feast days and the only Holy Day we find is the Lord's Day. But the surrounding cultures had plenty of feasts, so many in the church decided, *"well they've been honoring their particular god on this day for centuries so if we keep the day, but replace their god with the celebration of say a saint or a biblical event like the birth of Christ, then we can make Christianity more palatable to these people."* You see they figured that as long as the people stopped being pagans and became Christians, then whatever made that process more palatable was a good thing. Really if we want to ask the question why did the Roman Catholic church bear so little resemblance to the Apostolic church by the year 1517, the answer is largely to be found in 1400 years of syncretistic additions designed to make Christianity more popular, more palatable, more culturally relevant.

The Reformation then can be understood as a movement to remove centuries of consumer-driven additions and make the church bible-driven once again. There is a reason why Sola Scriptura, "THE BIBLE ALONE" was a rallying cry of the Reformation. The belief was that the Bible alone should be the rule and guide for all of faith life and practice, regardless of whether it was popular. Not only that the Reformed emphasized the sufficiency of scripture, they said bible was just the starting place for our thinking about how to be the church, it contained everything that we needed to know about how to be the church regardless of the place and the time. And that anything that we added to it would make the church less perfect, not more perfect.

Now I would argue that in recent years, evangelicals and even Reformed evangelicals have by and large lost that understanding of the sufficiency of scripture. Instead of being Bible Driven, Evangelicalism has become largely a Consumer Driven movement once again. This isn't surprising. For decades now, "church growth" gurus like George Barna and his ilk have been telling evangelicals that the wave of the future was that all churches would have to become seeker-sensitive and culturally relevant in order to survive in 21st century. Via books like Barna's *User Friendly Churches* (1991) they helped drive a revolution that has virtually wiped out the traditional church model in evangelicalism and replaced it with the "seeker sensitive" or consumer sensitive model. They told us in order to prosper the church would have to take its queues from the culture. The problem is that whoever weds themselves to the culture today finds themselves a widow tomorrow because the culture is constantly changing. We are already seeing in some seeker churches an acknowledgment that the culture has moved on since the 1980s and that their worship is becoming obsolete and irrelevant to modern youth and young adults. The majority of whom leave the church when they get to college age.

So people are scrambling to find something new, we have boutique churches seeking to meet particular niche consumers. We have Celtic churches for people who like Irish and Scottish culture and enjoy kilts and bagpipes, Cowboy Churches for modern day cowpokes, rave churches for modern party going youth. Barna's latest book "Revolution" simply takes his consumer model to its logical conclusion, if people are rejecting the seeker-sensitive church, it must mean they don't want the institutional church any more, so his new push is the unchurching movement: Barna openly promotes this "unchurching" movement as a good thing, even when it involves replacing attending church with "golf fellowships" made up of Christian men who glorify god by spending Sunday playing 18 holes. We used to call that being worldly.

What I believe is that we don't need Barna's Revolution, we don't need the next big consumer driven change. ***We need a Reformation!*** I agree that the modern church is in crisis, just as the church was in crisis in 1517. And that is why we need once again to go back to being the BIBLE DRIVEN CHURCH. God's word, which is timeless, and living and powerful turned the world upside-down in the time of the apostles and it did it again at the time of the Reformation, and it can do it again today.

That is why I believe that our model for church planting and church Reformation should be the Bible Driven Old-School Presbyterian model – and while I will be talking specifically about the Presbyterian I will say that there are both Baptist and Dutch Reformed equivalents of that model that were flourishing at about the same time. For instance, those of you familiar with men like James Pettigru Boyce and John Broadus will immediately recognize how similar this philosophy is to the philosophy they were following in the Baptist context.

Anyway what then is an Old School Presbyterian Church?

First, the term "Old School" in the title is not specifically a reference to the pop culture phrase "old school" which, according to Wikipedia:

“is a slang term referring to an older school of thinking or acting and to old objects in general, within the context of newer, more modern times. Rather than carrying the negative connotation of obsolete, it may be used to refer to a time of perceived higher standards or level of craft. The term “old school” may be effectively equivalent to “They just don’t make ‘em like this anymore”

Having said that, there are elements in the definition above that would be applicable to the term “Old School” as we are using it. Old School Presbyterianism is indeed an older school of thought which reached its zenith in the 19th century, Old School Presbyterian churches do indeed stand out in the modern context, and we would argue that they are the product of a commitment to the highest possible standard that is the bible.

However, where we would diverge with the above definition is in that when it comes to Old School churches, “they just don’t make ‘em like this anymore” doesn’t need to be the case. Since we believe that God is the builder of these churches, and his unchanging Word is the blueprint, there is no reason we shouldn’t be able to build new Old School churches.

What are the distinctives of this model? Well there are many but for the sake of time, I’m just going to outline the ones that that might be considered foundational to Old School Presbyterianism. I’m going to set before you three major rules that I believe we can find in the great commission given by Christ to the church that we read earlier

I. That all authority had been given to Christ, not the church. He alone had the power to command men’s consciences, and that conversely the church has no power to create new rules, rites, and ceremonies, we have been told to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” not what we like or what they want to hear.

II. That Scripture is the only sufficient rule and guide for all of our faith, life, and practice, and that by following it “the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:17)

III. That the traditions of men have “indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion” Col. 2:23 but were ultimately of no value no matter how popular or antique they are.

And here I need to say this, Old School Presbyterianism is not “traditionalism.” Old School Presbyterianism is not essentially a reaction against contemporary theological movements in the church, or simply a conservative theological position that maintains that when it comes to the doctrine and practice of the church, older is always better. Rather in OSP theology the commanding principle is not “is it antique” or ancient, or did Grandma like it?, but rather is it simple and biblical? So Old School Presbyterianism would reject the slogan Older is Better, in favor of Biblical is Best.

Now with those general rules in place we can come to some more specific applications:

1) Old School Presbyterians are committed to the idea that the Bible, which is the Word of God, is entirely sufficient for everything in our faith, life, and practice and we do not need to add anything of our own, nor should we.

Therefore our worship is to be ordered according to God’s instructions, and not according to our imaginations or traditions or in any way God has not prescribed for us. This formulation is sometimes referred to as the Regulative Principle of Worship, which refers to the idea that our worship is entirely regulated and ruled by the teaching of scripture. This means that Old School Worship is neither “contemporary” nor “traditional” but simple and biblical. This means that it’s not your preferences or my preferences or the cultures preferences that should prevail but God’s commands.

Now this has always been a tough sell, because our very nature says if I like it God must like it! The Reformers ran into exactly the same problem when THEY were reforming worship:

“I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, “Obedience is better than sacrifice.” “In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men,” (1 Samuel 15:22; Matthew. 15:9.) Every addition to His word, especially in this matter, is a lie. Mere “will worship” is vanity. This is the decision, and when once the judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate.” - From John Calvin’s The Necessity of Reforming the Church

2) In Church Polity Old School Presbyterians are committed to the idea that Presbyterianism is the form of church polity the bible teaches. Presbyterian comes from the term Presbyter or “elder.” This means that the only the offices found in the bible, those of Elder and Deacon, and that

3) In Theology, Old School Presbyterians are committed to the Calvinism of the Westminster Standards, and believe this is the system of doctrine that the Bible teaches. They further believe that when men are ordained in Presbyterian churches, their subscription to the standards should be full and complete, and that any exceptions that a man has to the standards should be minimal.

4) Old School Presbyterians are also committed to the doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church and believe that the Church is not to embroil itself in party politics, nationalism, or anything that Christ has not commissioned his church to do. This is VITAL [explain why] Dr. Morton Smith explains further what the spirituality of the church entails:

“There is a twofold work for the Church to accomplish. It is the gathering of the elect through the preaching of the Word, and then the instruction of those thus gathered in the full teaching of the Word. In other words the mission of the Church is to evangelize the lost, and then to teach the whole counsel of God to those who have been evangelized. We see the Church in Acts also ministering to her poor, but ultimately this was to the end that they could be taught the faith. This and this alone is the mission of the Church. R. B. Kuiper says, “The church’s task is to teach and preach the Word of God. Whatever else it may properly do is subordinate and subsidiary to that task. This is its supreme task.” He concludes his chapter on this subject by saying:

Just because the preaching of the Word is so great a task the church must devote itself to it alone. For the Church to undertake other activities, not indissolubly bound up with this one, is a colossal blunder, because it inevitably results in neglect of its proper ask. Let not the church degenerate into a social club. Let not the church go into the entertainment business. Let not the church take sides on such aspects of economics, politics, or natural science as are not dealt with in the Word of God. And let the church be content to teach special, not general revelation. Let the church be the church.

We may add further that since this was the only task given to the Church by her King, the Church should confine herself to carrying out this task and this task alone.”

5) Old School Presbyterians also believe in preaching that is biblical, expository, and doctrinal but warm and aimed not merely at the intellect, but at men's hearts and convictions. They are interested in and pray for genuine biblical revival within God's churches.

1 Tim. 4:13 Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

1 Tim. 4:16 Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

2 Cor. 5:20 Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

2 Timothy 4:1 I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom:

2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;

4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

5 But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Now often when you talk about planting this kind of church, people will answer its impossible! You can't plant that kind of church today. I remember hearing a presentation quite some time ago from an expert in church planting who insisted that if you are going to plant a new church, it **simply has to be** seeker-sensitive and resemble the surrounding culture more than anything else. He maintained that you can't start successful old-school, conservative, Presbyterian churches in our society it is impossible because people will not accept all the change and counter-cultural baggage that happens in such a church. In fact one big name in the PCA has essentially written a highly influential essay saying the same thing. In a consumer culture, we are told, people will insist on having only that which they are comfortable with. Well guys, I've been involved in two "impossible" Old-School church plants, one in Pennsylvania and one in North Carolina and both of them still exist after many years and continue to grow and thrive by God's grace so apparently the impossible is possible after all.

It always reminds me of the day when I was trying to teach my son to peddle his bike. He told me that it was impossible and that peddling a bike simply cannot be done, meanwhile his sister was peddling her own bike in circles around him.

It's not impossible to ride bikes or plant old school Presbyterian churches, it just seems too difficult to even start, and therefore we upgrade our assessment to the level of impossibility and reconcile ourselves to not doing it. When you do that though, the problem isn't the task, the problem is you.

Planting Old School churches is a little like the conquest of Canaan, the task seems impossible, the alien and hostile culture insurmountable, and compromise the only solution. We should be willing to admit that if we advance in our own power we will indeed fail, but if we proceed in the name of the Lord, clinging to His promises, and obeying His commands He will bless our endeavors. He is not fickle, He doesn't change, if He has called us to "Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it" and promised blessing to those who will do so, those promises

are still good. The problem is not with the promises or power behind them, the problem is that like the Israelites over time we have become pragmatists and have ceased to believe that such things are possible.

“In spite of our professions, we are in fact barely supernaturalists. Again and again our Lord has to remind us that God is not the prisoner of human odds, that his promises are at least as real as the iron plating on Canaanite Chariots, but that we will see little of His power until we venture out into the way of obedience, until we trust his promise enough to walk in it.” – Dale Ralph Davis.

I acknowledge that OSP churches are counter-cultural – they are neither the “traditional churches” that developed as a protestant reflection of American culture as it existed 50 to 100 years ago and they also go against the consumer driven church model. It is my belief that because OSP churches have a solid rock foundation, they will be able to stand in the midst of all the tempests of our culture.