1. Timeless Examples for Church Practice  
(New Testament Patterns)

**Introduction:** There is little question how the early church did things. The real question is:  
*Why should doing church the New Testament was matter to you? What does it really matter, anyway?*

We all want success in ministry, to hear Jesus say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Jesus didn’t leave us wondering about the best way to do things. He equipped the ancient church with strategies designed to help us carry out all that He commanded.

In view of the unique relationship between Jesus and His apostles, we should be very careful to not neglect the church practices they established.

Whether planting a new church, involved with a revitalization effort, or trying to make a good church better, it is always good to ask what the best way to do things is. Jesus gave us a strategy for success that the Apostles modeled for us in the way they set up churches.

If anybody ever understood the true purposes of the church, and how to best achieve them, it was the Twelve, the Apostles, those men who were hand-picked and personally trained by Jesus.

**The Purpose of the Church:** Oxford University professor of church history Stanley Greensdale stated: “The church exists to promote the worship of God, the inner life of the spirit, the evangelization of the world and the molding of society according to the will of God.”¹

**Premise:** Jesus knew the best ways to achieve these purposes. The Apostles intentionally modeled them for us in the churches they planted.

Therefore, adopting the ways of the Apostles better allows the Spirit to work love, unity, community, and commitment in a body of believers.

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:

The way the apostles did it, or some other way (you own way). Most people opt for this second choice. And they are very creative in what they dream up. They could sing the old Frank Sinatra song, “I did it my way”.

**Philosophical Question:** Suppose it were possible for us to write a letter to the original apostles, asking them if they thought we should “do” church their way, or if we were free to do it our way. *How would the apostles have answered the letter?* (Rhetorical).

1) Might the apostles have answered with very specific instructions? With a particular way of doing things? With a definite agenda? With very particular guidelines?

2) Would they have written that each church was free to do whatever it wanted to do? That each church should just pray, get wise counsel and follow the Holy Spirit’s leading? That each congregation should be unique and different? That they should be free of outside influence?

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*: “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.”

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.

As regards church practice, many have concluded that the apostles did not intend the record of the way they did things to serve as normative, and that we are therefore free to “do” church our own way. However, here are five reasons why the church practices found in the New Testament are not “merely” described.

I. Holding to New Testament patterns is LOGICAL

**ESV 1 Corinthians 4:16-17** I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

****In 1 Corinthians 4:16-17, 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. The same would have been true for the way Paul set-up churches. It just makes sense to do things Paul’s way.

**Form Follows Function:** It is a design 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.

**Example:** If my function is to sell fertilizer, then my form will be to call on farmer, not ballet studios!

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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.

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 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. It just makes sense to do things Paul’s way.

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

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

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.

KJV 1 Corinthians 11:34 The rest I will set in order when I come …” (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.
J. L. Dagg (Southern Baptist theologian, professor of theology and president of Mercer University): “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.”

II. Holding to apostolic traditions is PRAISEWORTHY

ESV 1 Corinthians 11:2 I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.

****In 1 Corinthians 11:2, why did Paul praise the Corinthians? He praised them for holding to his traditions.

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).

When Paul wrote “everything” (1Co 11:2), what did he have in mind? The context here is specifically church practice.

5. How might “everything” (11:2) apply to church order traditions? 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 Paul’s traditions for church practice, for church meetings.

6. In 1 Corinthians 11:2, what is the general difference between “teachings” (NIV) and “traditions” (ESV)? Do a word study. The regular Greek word for “teaching” is didaké (basis for “didactic”), and means something that is taught, a precept or doctrine:

Example: NAS Acts 2:42 ... they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching (didaché) ...

However, didaké is not the word used in 1 Corinthians 11:2. Instead, paradosis is used. It means tradition. Thus, the ESV has “traditions” here instead of “teachings” (NIV).

Word Study: In English, a tradition is usually thought of a handed-down teaching or a practice. Webster’s says it is an inherited pattern of thought or action. The Greek word for tradition, paradosis, means “that which is handed down” (be it information or custom).
a) Custom: 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 ...

b) Information: *Paradosis* can also refer to a teaching that is passed on. For example, *paradosis* was a technical term in Judaism for oral transmission of religious instruction.

Summary: With tradition, that which is handed over could be:
- a) A tradition of a certain custom or way of doing things (such as Lord’s Supper).
- b) A tradition of a certain teaching (as in Judaism)

Question: Which is it here, in our passage? 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.”

Indeed, 1 Corinthians 11 begins a long section on church practice (chapters 11-14).

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.

7. What application could be drawn from the fact that the word “traditions” (11:2) is plural? Paul had in mind more than the one tradition of head coverings. He was pleased that the church held to all of his traditions for church practice.

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

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

Jesus blasted the tradition of the Pharisees because it caused them to disobey direct commands from the Lord. In contrast, Paul blessed the Corinthians for following the traditions of an apostle. Apostolic traditions help us live out the teachings 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 (found in history)? Which should be given preference? Why? It is our privilege to leave the muddied water of church history and drink at the pure spring water of inspired New Testament writing.

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Thus, we are not advocating the supposedly inspired apostolic tradition found in church history as claimed by Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. Instead, we promote only those apostolic traditions that can be found in the pages of the New Testament.

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

11. 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 for the poor to gather and eat. Nothing was said about figs. Every farmer, regardless of the crop, was to leave a similar portion of his harvest to meet the needs of the poor. How would the paradigm principle apply to the commands in the New Testament to follow specific apostolic traditions (2Th 2:15, 3:6)? We argue that adherence to apostolic tradition is also paradigmatic in nature. 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.

III. Holding to Apostolic Traditions was Expected.

****In 1 Corinthians 11:16, how did Paul quiet those inclined to be contentious? Just to realize that one was “different” was argument enough to silence opposition.⁶

ESV 1 Corinthians 11:16 If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

12. What does 1 Corinthians 11:16 indicate in principle about uniformity of practice in New Testament churches? Paul expected all churches to be doing the same thing.

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

ESV 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34 As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches.

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

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⁶ It is beyond the scope of this study to deal with the particulars of head coverings.
**What is the answer to the two questions in 1 Corinthians 14:36?** The church in Corinth did not produce the word of God, nor were they the only church that was in possession of the word of God.

**ESV 1 Corinthians 14:36** Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?

**How does 14:36 constitute a chide?** The chide was for wanting to do something different than what all the other churches were doing. The church in Corinth had no authority to deviate from the church practices that Paul taught them.

14. How do Paul’s questions in 1 Corinthians 14:36 reveal that a uniformity of practice was the norm among New Testament churches? Evidently all the churches were expected to follow the same patterns in their ecclesiology. The Corinthian church was to stay in line.

Jim Elliot (missionary martyr): “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.”

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IV. Holding to apostolic traditions could potentially bring God’s Peaceful Presence

**According to Philippians 4:8-9 how can a church be in position for God to be with them?** The Philippians were to put into practice “what” (4:9) they learned, received, heard or saw from Paul.

**ESV Philippians 4:8-9** Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

**What is the general context of Philippians 4:8-9?** The context concerns 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.

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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 this would also include the way we see in the New Testament that Paul organized churches.

Watchman Nee (Chinese church planter): “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 ... 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.”

E.H. Broadbent (undercover missionary): “Events in the history of the churches in the time of the apostles have been selected and recorded in the Book of Acts in such a way as to provide a permanent pattern for the churches. Departure from this pattern has had disastrous consequences, and all revival and restoration have been due to some return to the pattern and principles in the Scriptures.”

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V. Holding to Apostolic Tradition is Commanded

ESV 2 Thessalonians 2:15 ... stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

****What were the Thessalonians commanded to do (2Th 2:15)? They were commanded to follow apostolic traditions. This constitutes divine direction.

16. In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, what does the word “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, it would also apply in principle to their traditions regarding church order, as patterned in the New Testament. Furthermore, 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.

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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).

Roger Williams: Williams planted the very first Baptist church in North America (1600s). He believed that churches should strive for as near approximate as possible to New Testament forms and ordinances. 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.**

A.W. Tozer: “The temptation to introduce "new" things into the work of God has always been too strong for some people to resist. The Church has suffered untold injury at the hands of well-intentioned but misguided persons, who have felt that they know more about running God's work, than Christ and His apostles did! A solid train of boxcars would not suffice to haul away the religious truck which has been brought into the service of the Church with the hope of improving on the original pattern. These things have been, one and all, great hindrances to the progress of the Truth, and have so altered the divinely planned structure that the apostles, were they to return to earth today, would scarcely recognize the misshapen thing which has resulted!”

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.

Conclusion

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).

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

Fee & Stuart’s Revised: Concerning the relevance of New Testament patterns, a later 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—unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.”

Most churches follow some of the patterns in the New Testament, such as: meeting on the Lord’s Day, believer’s baptism, the separation of church and state, a plurality of elders, the priesthood of the believer, and congregational polity. However, now all traditions are followed. 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.

What are the most important neglected apostolic traditions that should still be followed today? (Feel free to disagree).

1. Lord’s Supper: A Frequent Fellowship Feast:
   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.

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

3. Congregational Church Government:
   A plurality of Elders Ruling Through Building Congregational Consensus—not elder rule, not majority rule, not congregational unanimity.

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4. Smaller Churches (Roma-villa sized churches): Everything in the New Testament was written to a church that met in a home (Ro 16:5, Col 4:15, Phlm 2). Everyone knew everyone else. 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. There were no mega churches. The New Testament norm is many smaller churches rather than a few mega churches.

Application: What we have argued for here is consistency. Most churches already follow some of these patterns, but not all. Our question is, Why not? This consistency is especially important since the apostles expected for all churches to follow their traditions “just as” (NIV) they were handed down.

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 may be hurt, damaged, worn out.

19. 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.

— Summary —

1. God directs by patterns (traditions) as well as by precept (teaching).
2. The church life patterns in the New Testament are generally applicable for the church in all ages and places.
3. Apostolic traditions are consistent with apostolic teachings.
4. Without Christ at the center of things, the patterns become legalism and death, a hollow form, an empty shell. 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.” We need the proper wine skin, but more importantly we need the wine. Both have their place. Either one without the other is problematic.

Readily found are discarded empty bottles. A bottle, without its contents, is nearly worthless. What people buy is what is in the bottle (in this case wine). Yet once you have the wine, it must go into something. The container takes on importance because of its contents. The container can impact the enjoyment of the contents. For example, why do wine connoisseurs never drink their wine out of Dixie cups? It is much better to use a wine glass. So too, Jesus said not to put new wine in an old wineskin! If the new wine could be compared to our new lives in Christ, then the wineskin might be compared to how we structure and organize church.
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.

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 vice 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.

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!

20. 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.

21. 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).
22. Read the chapter entitled, “Timeless Apostolic Traditions” in *New Testament Church Dynamics*. What are some of the apostolic traditions for church practice that are often neglected today?

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?

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, 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 are by temperament conservative and like stability.

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, 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 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 our series on Early Church Practice at SermonAudio.com/NTRF and find this lesson.

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