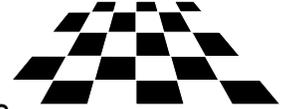


5. CHURCH TRADITIONS



Introduction: *Why should doing church the New Testament way matter to you?*

Two Options: There are really only two ways to “do” church: **1)** The way the apostles did it, or **2)** some other way (you own way). Most church leaders throughout history have concluded that the apostles did *not* intend the record of the way the apostles did things to serve as normative. They feel they are free to “do” church their own way.

Premise: Jesus equipped the ancient church with church strategies designed to help carry out all that He commanded. The Apostles modeled these for us in the way they set up churches. Therefore, adopting the ways of the Apostles better allows the Spirit to work love, unity, community, and commitment in a body of believers. Their church traditions to be normative, and are not are not merely described.

I. Holding to New Testament Ecclesiology is Logical

1. What is the meaning of the design axiom “form follows function”? “Form follows function” is a principle associated industrial design, and it means the shape of an object should primarily relate to its intended purpose. In other words, what something looks like should be determined by what you want it to do.

In matters of faith, this is similar to the idea that belief determines behavior, or that doctrine determines duty.

2. How could the axiom *form follows function* be applied the apostles’ ecclesiology?

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. It makes logical sense to do church the way the apostles originally set it up.

J. L. Dagg (Early 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.”¹

II. Holding to Apostolic Church Traditions is Commendable

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

3. When Paul wrote “everything” (1Co 11:2), what topic did he have in mind? See 1 Corinthians 11 -14. This section of the letter specifically concerns ecclesiology.

¹ J.L. Dagg, *Treatise on Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 84.

4. What is the difference between teachings and traditions (1 Co 11:2)? The regular Greek word for “teaching” is *didaké* (basis for “didactic”), and means something that is taught:

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

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

• **“traditions” (11:2):** The Greek word for tradition, *paradosis*, means “that which is handed down” (be it custom or information).² It is an inherited pattern of action or thought. A tradition can be either a handed-down **a) teaching** or **b) handed-down custom**.

a) 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.

b) 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 ...

Summary: With tradition, that which is handed down could be the tradition of a way of doing things (such as Lord’s Supper), or the tradition of a certain teaching (as in Judaism)

Question: Which is it here, in 1 Corinthians 11:2? 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.”³

Based on 1 Corinthians 11:2, how closely had they followed Paul’s traditions? The words “even as” indicate about the degree to which they maintained Paul’s traditions. Paul praised them for holding to his traditions just as (*kathos*) he passed them on to them. They adhered to every iota; it was sort of a photocopy effect! The apostles evidently designed for the churches to mimic the traditions (inherited patterns) that they had established.

5. Why is it significant that the word “traditions” (11:2) is plural? The particular issue dealt with in 1 Corinthians 11 is a woman’s head covering. That the word traditions is plural flags that 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.

6. Jesus criticized the Pharisees’ traditions (Mt 15:2), but Paul praised the church for holding to his traditions (1Co 11:2). Why the difference? Jesus blasted the tradition of

² Rienecker, *Linguistic Key*, 423. See also Bauer, *Lexicon*, 615.

³ Gordon Fee, “Corinthians,” *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 499.

the Pharisees because they preferred it over the direct commands from the Lord. In contrast, Paul blessed the Corinthians for following the traditions of an apostle because apostolic traditions helped them live out the teachings of Jesus.

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

7. Why is it important to make a distinction between New Testament church traditions and historical church traditions? J.L. Dagg pointed out that it is our privilege to leave the muddied water of church history and drink at the pure spring water of inspired New Testament writing.⁴ 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.

What is paradigmatic law? It is case law, law by example.

8. Mosaic legislation contains case studies for right behavior. People were expected to apply these few examples to other areas of life not specifically given. For instance, the corners of wheat fields were to be left for the poor to eat. Nothing was said about figs groves. However, fig owners were expected to know to leave the corners for the poor. How would this paradigm principle apply to Paul's commendation regarding his traditions (1Co 11:2)? 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.

Roger Williams: Williams planted the first-ever 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.⁵

III. Holding to Apostolic Church Traditions was Expected.

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

******In 1 Corinthians 11:16, how did Paul quiet those inclined to be contend against his traditions?** Just to realize that one was "different" was argument enough to silence opposition.⁶

9. What does 1 Corinthians 11:16 reveal about uniformity of practice in all churches?

Paul expected all churches to do the same thing with regard to church practice.

⁴ Dagg, *Church Order*, 84.

⁵ Edwin Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 106.

⁶ There is an article on head coverings at NTRF.org.

KJV 1 Corinthians 11:34b The rest I will set in order when I come ..." (italics mine)

There was obviously a definite "order", pattern, or tradition that was followed in organizing the churches.

ESV **Titus 1:5a** ... I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order ...

10. What does Titus 1:5 imply about uniformity of practice in the early church? Compare 1 Corinthians 11:34b. This passage deals directly with ecclesiology (the appointment of qualified elders). It is clear 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 "order."

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

******Based on 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34, what was true in all congregations?**

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

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?

******What is the answer to the two questions in 1 Corinthians 14:36?** The word of God did not originate in the church in Corinth, nor were they the only church it had reached.

12. What was going on with the church in Corinth that would cause Paul to ask such questions (1Co 14:36)? They already knew the answer to these two questions. A desire to deviate from apostolic tradition was evidently the problem.

13. What message was Paul sending through these two questions (1Co 14:36)? The church wanted to do something differently than what all the other churches were doing. The questions make the point that the church in Corinth had no authority to deviate from the church traditions that Paul taught them.

14. How do Paul's questions in 1 Corinthians 14:36 reveal that a uniformity of church 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.”⁷

IV. Holding to Apostolic Traditions Brings God’s Peaceful Presence

ESV Philippians 4:9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

******According to Philippians 4:9 how can a church be in position for God to be with it?**

The Philippians were to put into practice “whatever” they learned, received, heard or saw from Paul.

15. How might Philippians 4:9 be applied with respect to Paul’s church practices? The general context of Philippians 4:8-9 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. 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.”⁸

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.”⁹

V. Holding to Apostolic Traditions 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.

⁷ Elizabeth Elliot, *Shadow of The Almighty: Life and Testimony of Jim Elliot* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 138-139.

⁸ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Colorado Springs: International Students Press, 1969), 8-9.

⁹ E.H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, (Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio Press 1999), 26.

******What were the Thessalonians commanded to do (2Th 2:15)?** They were commanded to follow apostolic traditions. Many believers feel that while apostolic traditions are interesting, following them is never commanded. This, however, is not the case. This constitutes divine direction.

16. In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, what “traditions” were the Thessalonians commanded to hold to? This is the same Greek word, *paradosis*, used in 1 Corinthians 11:2 (“traditions”). The overall context of 2 Thessalonians 2 refers to *teaching* traditions for eschatology, not ecclesiology.

What is the significance of “traditions” being plural (2Th 2:15)? The fact that it is in the plural reveals that the author clearly had more in view than merely the one tradition about eschatology. The command here in **2:15** applies to all their traditions, including traditions regarding ecclesiology, as patterned in the New Testament.

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.

ESV 2 Thessalonians 3:6 ... keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

******What “tradition” did the apostles pass on in 2 Thessalonians 3:6?** The specific context here refers to gainful employment versus idleness, 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).

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!”¹⁰

17. 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.

¹⁰ Robert Crosby, “A.W. Tozer on The Holy Spirit & Today’s Church,” Patheos.com. Accessed 10/16/2016.

Those who have a McDonald's franchise have little choice as to how that restaurant will be operated. They do not have the liberty of selling extra items, of designing their own building, setting the prices, of making up their own pricing, etc. This same approach should be followed in how we set up and run churches. Following New Testament patterns does not mean every church will be exactly alike (cookie cutter). Certainly, there will be similarity in the basics, but there is also freedom within the boundaries of the form (like in music, food, clothing styles, etc.).

So What?

18. What conclusion can be drawn about God's desire for the modern church to follow apostolic traditions of church practice? 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.

— Summary —

1. God directs by **patterns** (traditions) as well as by precept (teaching).
2. The ecclesiology of the New Testament is **generally applicable** for the church in all ages and places.
3. Apostolic ecclesiological 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.

Most churches follow some apostolic traditions, such as meeting on the Lord's Day, believer's baptism, the separation of church and state, and a plurality of leaders. However, not 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.

Apostolic traditions for church practice that are often neglected today? Neglected apostolic traditions that should still be followed today:

1. The Lord's Supper celebrated as a weekly fellowship feast.
2. Participatory church meetings.
3. A plurality of servant leaders who take the time to build congregational consensus.
4. Intentionally smaller Churches (Roma-villa sized churches).

Consistency: 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.

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.

Alignment Example: A car with its front end out of alignment will still take its driver where he wants to go, but at the price of 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.

Example: 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.

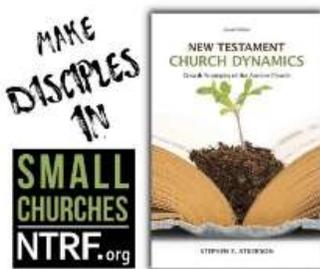
Caution: It is possible to be as straight as a gun barrel theologically, but just as empty. Our focus is not on a dry, rote reconstruction of early church practice, but on living out the examples left to us by the apostles in the power and leading of the Holy Spirit.

**** = 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: At NTRF.org you’ll find an article, mp3 and video on this topic.

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NTRF.org
Revised 01/10/2024



Depth Addendum

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.

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. 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 this 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!

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.)? 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. Beware of making patterns out of things that are onetime events. 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.

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, and **4)** have a reasonable, obvious purpose (it is not mindless aping).

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....”

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

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!
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. 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.

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.”

