

TRADITION: A STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS

A church alive is worth the drive. Jesus did not leave us wondering how to encourage spiritual growth. Through the apostles, He equipped the ancient church with strategic, timeless traditions to make disciples. *Success in fulfilling God's purposes for His body awaits your church if you adopt the apostolic traditions found in the New Testament.* In view of the unique relationship between Jesus and His apostles, we should be careful not to neglect the church practices they established.

PROFIT

According to **Stanley Greenslade**, an evangelical professor of church history at Oxford University, “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 Jesus knew the best ways to achieve these purposes. The apostles intentionally modeled these practices for us in the churches they founded. Their example was intended to constitute normal and universal church practice. God gave Israel a clear pattern for the Tabernacle and worship in the Old Covenant. What pattern did He give for worship in the New Covenant? God’s spiritual Temple must be built on the Chief Cornerstone both in doctrine and sound practice. Adopting the ways of the Apostles better allows the Spirit to create unity, community, commitment, and love in a body of believers. Growing churches love, and loving churches grow.²

PRESUMPTION

Church leaders have two options for ecclesiology. One is to adopt the ways of the apostles. The other is to follow a path of their own choosing. Regarding historical precedence, **Gordon Fee** and **Douglas Stuart**, in *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth*, 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.”³ No one, for example, would advocate following Jephthah’s tragic example in **Judges 11:29ff**. However, when it comes to church practice, Fee and Stuart also noted that “almost all biblical Christians tend to treat precedent as having normative authority to some degree or another.”⁴ What evidence is there that New Testament traditions for church practice were not “merely” described in Scripture but were intended to function in a normative way?

PROOF #1—HOLDING TO TRADITION IS PRAISEWORTHY

1 Corinthians 11–14 constitutes a four-chapter section on church practice. In this passage, Paul revealed his attitude about following his ecclesiological traditions: “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you” (**1Co 11:2**). He praised the church at Corinth for holding to his traditions.

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed. (1973), s.v. “Early Christian Church.”

² Adrian Rogers, *Adrianisms* (Collierville, TN: Innovo Press, 2015), 271.

³ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 97.

⁴ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 124.

The Greek for “traditions,” *paradosis*, means “that which is passed on.”⁵ It differs from the Greek word for “teaching” (*didaché*). In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, **Gordon Fee** pointed out that in the context of **1 Corinthians 11**, *paradosis* specifically refers to religious traditions regarding worship.⁶ This same Greek word in verb form is found a few paragraphs later with regard to the practice of the Lord’s Supper—that it was “passed on” from Paul to the church (**11:23**).

It is significant that the word “traditions” in **1 Corinthians 11:2** is plural. Paul clearly had in mind more than the one tradition dealt with in **1 Corinthians 11a**.⁷ The words “even as” in **11:2** indicate the degree of their compliance with these traditions: *exactly* as passed on to them. Paul praised the church for holding precisely to his traditions regarding worship. He would likely feel the same about our churches following the traditions he established for church practice.

Mosaic legislation was paradigmatic in nature. It was case law. Only a few legal examples were recorded by Moses. The Israelites were expected to apply these case studies to other areas of life not specifically cited. Similarly, we argue that adherence to apostolic tradition is paradigmatic in nature. If we observe that the apostles were pleased when a church followed one specific tradition of church practice (**1 Corinthians 11:2**), then we would be expected to apply that approval to other patterns we see modeled by the apostles in their establishment of churches. The church, the Bride of Christ, is too eternally important to allow her to deviate from traditions established by the Lord and His apostles.

Of course, not all religious traditions are good. The tradition of the Pharisees undermined God’s commands. The same word used by Paul in **1 Corinthians 11:2** was also used by Jesus when He asked the Pharisees, “Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition (*paradosis*)?” (**Mt 15:3**). In contrast, Paul blessed the Corinthians for following his traditions. Apostolic traditions are consistent with the teachings of Christ. Thus, holding to the traditions of the apostles is thus praiseworthy, as seen in Paul’s praise for the Corinthian church (**11:2**).

PROOF #2—HOLDING TO TRADITION WAS EXPECTED

The churches of the New Testament were expected to follow apostolic traditions for church practice. In the four-chapter section on church practice referenced above (**1Co 11–14**), Paul quieted those who disagreed with his traditions by appealing to the universal practice of all the other churches: “If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God” (**1Co 11:16**). This statement was designed to settle any objections. Paul expected all churches to do the same things. Just to realize that one was different was argument enough to silence opposition. Prior emphasis had obviously been given to certain practices that were *supposed to be done the same way, everywhere*. This indicates a uniformity of practice in all New Testament churches.

In **1 Corinthians 14:33b–35**, Paul referred to something else that was true universally: “As in *all the churches* of the saints, the women should keep silent in the *churches*” (italics mine). Paul again appealed to a universal pattern that existed in all churches as a basis for

⁵ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 615.

⁶ Gordon Fee, “The First Epistle to the Corinthians,” *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 499.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 500.

obedience.⁸ The point to be observed is that all churches were expected to follow the same practices in their meetings.

The Corinthians were tempted to do things differently from other churches. Thus, after detailing how worship services should be conducted, Paul chided them: “Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached?” (**1Co 14:36**). The obvious answer to both questions is *no*. These two questions were designed to keep the Corinthians in line with the practice of all the other churches. They had no authority to deviate from the church traditions established by the apostles. Holding to apostolic traditions (New Testament church patterns) was expected in the first century. Perhaps it should be today as well. We should ask ourselves: Did the word of God come from our churches? Are our churches the only ones it has reached? If the Corinthian church had no authority to deviate from the traditions of the apostles, then neither do we.

PROOF #3—HOLDING TO TRADITION IS COMMANDED

Although apostolic traditions make for interesting history, many think that following them is optional. What, then, are we to make of **2 Thessalonians 2:15**, which actually *commands* us to “stand firm and hold to the traditions”?⁹ It appears that it is not just apostolic *teachings* to which we should adhere, but also apostolic *traditions* (as revealed exclusively within the pages of Scripture).¹⁰

The overall context of **2 Thessalonians 2:15** refers to the apostles’ teaching tradition concerning end-time events, not church practice *per se*. However, the word “traditions” (**2:15**) is yet again plural. The author clearly had more traditions in mind than merely the one teaching tradition about the second coming. Would this command not also apply in principle to his traditions regarding church order, which are modeled in the New Testament? We are to follow the traditions of the apostles, not only in their theology, but also in their practice.

A similar attitude towards tradition is expressed in the next chapter: “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us....” (**2Th 3:6-7**). The word “tradition” here clearly refers to practice more than doctrine. It is clear that the apostles wanted the churches to follow their traditions of *both* theology and practice. Should we limit those apostolic traditions that we follow *only* to work habits?

PROOF#4—HOLDING TO TRADITION IS LOGICAL

It is logical—it just makes sense—to follow the church practice traditions of the apostles (as recorded in Scripture). If anyone truly understood the purpose of the church, surely it was the apostles. They were handpicked and personally trained by Jesus for three years. After His resurrection, our Lord appeared to them over a forty-day period (**Acts 1:3**). Jesus then sent the Holy Spirit to teach them things He had not taught them (**Jn 14-16**). Paul received further revelation from Jesus during his fourteen years in the wilderness. The things Jesus taught these men about the church were naturally reflected in the way they set up and organized churches.

⁸ For help with interpreting 1 Corinthians 14:33b-35, see “Women: Silent in Church” at NTRF.org.

⁹ Imperative mode in Greek.

¹⁰ Apostolic tradition, as recorded in the pages of the New Testament, is to be distinguished from the later historical tradition of the Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

Paul's letter to Titus dealt directly with church practice: "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (**Titus 1:5**). It is evident from this passage that the apostles had a definite way they wanted things done regarding church practice. It was not left up to each individual assembly to find its own way. There was obviously a definite "order," pattern, or tradition that was followed in organizing the churches. Similarly, in **1 Corinthians 11:34** (another passage about church practice), Paul wrote, "The rest I will *set in order* when I come" (KJV, italics mine). It is logical—it just makes sense—to prefer the church traditions of the apostles. If the apostles were to return and see how modern churches function, would they be pleased or grieved?

Paul boldly offered himself as an example to be followed with regard to his faithful service to Christ: "I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy ... to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church" (**1Co 4:16–17**). Taking this a step further, for us to imitate Paul's ways in Christ regarding church practice would arguably be a wise choice for any fellowship.

PROOF #5—HOLDING TO TRADITION BRINGS GOD'S PEACEFUL PRESENCE

The church at Philippi was told how to have the God of Peace be with them: "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (**Php 4:9**). The context concerned such practices as imitating Christ's humility, putting others first, and rejoicing in the Lord. By extension, could it not also include the way Paul organized churches? It is clear from Scripture how the apostles designed churches to function. To bypass apostolic tradition in this area may, therefore, be to bypass some of God's blessings. Could fellowships that follow apostolic church practice enjoy more of God's peaceful presence?

PROFESSORS

Professors **Fee** and **Stuart** acknowledge that for many believers, **Acts** "not only tells us the history of the early church, but it also serves as the normative model for the church of all times."¹¹ They go on to recognize that large movements and new denominations have been "founded partly on the premise that virtually all New Testament patterns should be restored as fully as possible in modern times."¹²

Early Southern Baptist theologian **J. L. Dagg** believed that if the apostles "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."¹³

Anglican clergyman **Roger Williams** believed churches should strive to follow New Testament church forms and ordinances as closely as possible.¹⁴ This belief led Williams to found the Rhode Island colony on the New Testament pattern of a separation between church and state, and in 1638 to plant the first Baptist church in North America.

¹¹ Fee and Stuart, *Worth*, 4th ed., 112.

¹² *Ibid.*, 130.

¹³ J.L. Dagg, *A Treatise on Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 84.

¹⁴ Edwin Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 106.

According to **E.H. Broadbent**, church historian and undercover missionary to closed nations, “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.”¹⁵

According to Chinese church leader **Watchman Nee**, “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.”¹⁶

It was missionary martyr **Jim Elliot**’s firm conviction that “The pivot point hangs on whether 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.... It is incumbent upon me, if God has a pattern for the church, to find and establish that pattern, at all costs.”¹⁷

Pastor and author **A.W. Tozer** wrote, “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 that 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 He concluded: “If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.”¹⁹

PROPOSITION

What can be concluded about God’s interest in your church adhering to New Testament patterns for church practice? **Fee** and **Stuart** offered the general observation that what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way. In a later edition of their book, they qualified their position somewhat: “Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative (i.e. obligatory) way—*unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.*”²⁰ The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the apostles did indeed intend for churches to follow the patterns they laid down for church practice. Holding to their traditions for church practice, which were universally practiced in first-century churches, brings God’s

¹⁵ E.H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio Press, 1999), 26.

¹⁶ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Colorado Springs: International Students Press, 1969), 8–9.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Elliot, *Shadow of The Almighty: Life and Testimony of Jim Elliot* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 138–139.

¹⁸ James Snyder, *Tozer On Worship and Entertainment* (Camp Hill, PA: Wind Hill Publisher, 1997), chap. 17.

¹⁹ Robert Crosby, “A.W. Tozer on The Holy Spirit & Today’s Church,” Patheos.com. Accessed October 16, 2016.

²⁰ Fee and Stuart, *Worth*, 4th ed., 124.

peaceful presence. It is logical, praiseworthy, and even commanded. The question thus is not, *Must we do things the way they were done in the New Testament?* Rather, the question is, *Why would we want to do things any other way?*

What are some of these ancient apostolic traditions for church practice? Here is a list of some traditions still practiced, and others long neglected:

1. *Meeting weekly on Sunday, the Lord's Day, in honor of Jesus' resurrection.*
2. *Believer's baptism by immersion.*
3. *The separation of church and state.*
4. *A plurality of co-equal male elders leading every congregation.*
5. *Elder-led congregational consensus.*
6. *Participatory worship services.*
7. *Celebrating the Lord's Supper weekly as a fellowship meal.*
8. *Roman villa-sized churches (neither micro nor mega in size).*

Most churches follow some of these patterns, but not all. *Why not?* Perhaps it is because little attention is paid in seminary to the role apostolic traditions should play. Perhaps it is because most churches are firmly entrenched in man-made traditions developed long after the apostolic era. Many pastors have simply adopted historical traditions inherited from their denomination. Is there not a danger of neglecting the inspired tradition of the apostles for the sake of more modern traditions (**Mt 15:1–3**)?

We argue for consistency. The burden of explanation ought to fall on those who deviate from the New Testament pattern, not on those who desire to follow it. This consistency is especially important because the apostles evidently intended all churches to follow their traditions *just as* they were handed down (**1Co 11:2**). Perhaps these patterns of church practice are part of what gave the early church the dynamic that churches today are sometimes missing.

PERSPECTIVE

Even though all first-century churches adhered to apostolic practices, they were still far from perfect, as seen in Jesus' warnings to the churches in **Revelation**. However, adopting the ways of the apostles for church life is a strategic stepping stone to putting a fellowship in a better position to be all Christ wants it to be as His body. These practices will enrich your church, but are not the answer to all its problems. For example, without Christ at the center of things, New Testament church life patterns become legalism and death, a hollow form, an empty shell (**Jn 15:5**).

At the end of a very long life of faithful ministry, seminary professor **L. Reginald Barnard** cautioned that one can have a very scriptural idea of how the early church did things and yet miss the real idea of the church entirely. Barnard opined that even if our church is identical to the apostolic ideal, we would accomplish nothing unless that church was holier by far than the church we started with.²¹ Heaven forbid that, at the end, we present a form to God instead of a holy people redeemed by the Gospel.

We must always remember that the church is people, the living body of Christ. Jesus died to sanctify His bride, presenting her to Himself without spot or wrinkle, holy and blameless. There is no perfect church. Yet God will do His perfect work in His imperfect church, for it is His church.

When a church truly has new spiritual wine, the best church-practice wineskin for that wine is apostolic tradition. The church traditions of the apostles are simple, strategic, and

²¹ Letter to author, May 15, 1991.

scriptural. The most neglected practices are intentionally smaller congregations, participatory worship, celebrating the Lord's Supper weekly as a fellowship meal, and servant leadership that builds congregational consensus. Incorporating these traditions into our churches today can result in tremendous blessings. Such churches have a bright future and tremendous potential if their leaders maintain a focus on disciple-making in the context of dynamic, Spirit-filled early church practice. It is a divine design!

PRACTICUM

Lifelessness: Jesus came that we might have life and have it abundantly (**Jn 10:10**). Critical to any outworking of church life is first having an inner life to work out. Technically correct church practice without the wine of the Spirit is a hollow shell. It is dry, seasoned wood, all stacked up, with no fire. Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches. Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing (**Jn 15:5**). It is folly to give attention to outward perfection while neglecting that which is vital—a daily walk with the risen Lord. Jesus is the reality; apostolic church practice is the application of that reality.

License: A temptation for those who truly possess the inner reality of life in Jesus is to treat its outward expression as a matter of liberty. Having the greater (the wine), they feel that they themselves are competent to decide in lesser matters (the wineskin). They believe they have a license from the Spirit to do whatever they please with the outward form. To be bound by the ways of the apostles is seen as mindless aping. However, Jesus warned that pouring new wine into the wrong wineskin could lead to the loss of the wine (**Mt 9:17**). Do we really know better than the apostles how to organize churches? With specific reference to church practice, Paul admonished: “If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord” (**1Co 14:37**).

Legalism: The Roman world is gone forever. There is a big difference between holding to apostolic tradition versus mindlessly copying *everything* seen in the New Testament (wearing togas, writing on parchment, reading by oil lamps, etc.). The key is to focus on New Testament church practice. We must also beware of making patterns out of things that are not patterns in the New Testament. For instance, the Christian communalism of **Acts 4** was a one-time event for a single church. It is an option for believers of any age, but it is neither a command nor a Scriptural pattern.

Beware of making patterns out of silence. Some are so convinced that we should follow New Testament patterns that they feel they have no 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 were silent about using musical instruments, then they must not be used. In response, it must first be pointed out that the absence of a mention of a practice is not proof that the early church did not follow that practice. Second, this negative approach is essentially a form of legalism and leads easily to a judgmental spirit. Instead of seeking to positively follow clear New Testament patterns, advocates of this negative hermeneutic are best known for all the things they are against. Finally, if it is wrong to practice what the New Testament is silent about, then why did Jesus participate in the festival of Hanukkah and the synagogue system, both of which were extra-biblical, inter-testament historical developments?

Liberty: We advocate a normative hermeneutic: the church should normally hold to apostolic practices followed by the early church. Matters of silence are matters of freedom. If the Bible is silent about something—if there is neither command nor pattern to follow—then we have the liberty to do whatever suits us (following the lead of the Holy Spirit).

Are there ever any good reasons for going against New Testament patterns? Moses told the Israelites to observe a Saturday Sabbath—violating it was a capital offense. However, if an ox fell in the ditch, then work on the Sabbath was permissible. Jesus—the Lord of the Sabbath—clarified that it was also always appropriate to do good works on the Sabbath. He further taught that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. So, too, the traditions found in the New Testament are there for the sake of the church, not *vice versa*. Scripture indicates that we are generally to hold to the patterns laid down by the apostles. However, there are times when extenuating circumstances argue against keeping some patterns. Just don't let the exception become the rule.

We would place doing church the New Testament way—as opposed to any other way—in the same category as infant baptism versus believer's baptism. Sincere believers disagree over it. One position is in error, but it is a sincere error, and surely not in the same category as lying, stealing, adultery, etc. We have not intended to imply that not doing things the New Testament way is a sin. That said, we do intend to give pause to those not doing things the New Testament way, since the word "command" is used in reference to participatory meetings (**1Co 14:37**), and since holding to apostolic traditions is also commanded (**2Th 2:13**). The seven last words of churches today might be, "We never did it that way before." We want to spur pastors to action so that their churches don't miss out on potential blessings.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can the axiom *form follows function* be applied to how the apostles set up churches?
2. What in the New Testament indicates whether there was a basic uniformity of practice in all early churches?
3. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for holding to Jewish traditions (Mt 15). Paul praised the Corinthians for holding to his traditions (1Co 11). Why the difference?
4. Why is it important to make a distinction between apostolic traditions found in the New Testament and later historical traditions?
5. Mosaic Law was paradigmatic in nature. How would the paradigmatic principle apply to commands in the New Testament to follow specific apostolic traditions (2Th 2:15, 3:6)?
6. What gave the apostles authority to establish patterns that all churches are obliged to follow?
7. What is the difference between holding to apostolic traditions versus mindlessly copying everything seen in the New Testament (wearing sandals, writing on parchment, studying by oil lamps, dressing in togas, etc.)?
8. Jesus washed His disciples' feet. The Jerusalem church practiced communalism. How can we determine what is and is not intended to be an apostolic tradition?
9. What should we make of the fact that there is scholarly consensus regarding the actual practice of the early church in the New Testament?
10. Some think it foolish to try to recreate the primitive church, because it was far from perfect; God expected His church to mature, to grow up, beyond the infancy stage. How would you respond to this argument?

NTRF.org has audio, video, and a teacher's guide on traditions.

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