

# Apostolic Traditions: Obsolete?

by Steve Atkerson

*Can a church legitimately deviate from the apostolic example?*

*Nearly 2,000 years later, how are we to view the way the apostles did things?*

*Is the New Testament way of doing things merely interesting history, or did God intend for it to be normative for all churches in every age?*

*This article examines the various Biblical commendations and commands to churches with respect to the “traditions” of the apostles, as found exclusively on the pages of Scripture.*

Suppose a newly formed, first century congregation in Alexandria, Egypt, wrote a letter to the twelve apostles in Jerusalem. Imagine that this church consisted of Jewish believers who had heard the gospel on a visit to Jerusalem. Now back home in Egypt, they didn't know how to function as a New Covenant body of believers. So, in their letter was a series of questions about church life:

*Dear Apostles . . .*

*Why is it that we meet together as Jesus' people?*

*What should we do in our church meetings?*

*How often should we come together?*

*Does it matter where we gather?*

*Should we build a temple, like in Jerusalem, or at least a synagogue building?*

*What type of church government should we have?*

*What should we look for in church leaders?*

*Do we even need leaders?*

*What is the purpose of the Lord's Supper?*

*How often should we eat it? (Annually, like Passover?)*

*Should we eat the Lord's Supper as a true meal or a symbolic ritual?*

How do you suppose the Twelve would have answered? Would they have written that each church was free to do whatever it wanted to do? That each fellowship must independently pray and follow the Holy Spirit's leading? That each congregation should be unique and different, free from apostolic influence? Or conversely, might they have replied with very specific instructions for church life? With a particular way of doing things? With a definite agenda? With unmistakable congregational guidelines?

This same issue has faced believers for the past two thousand years. How, exactly, should today's church view New Testament patterns of church practice? As obsolete? Is the practice of the early church merely optional, or is it imperative for us? Are the traditions of the apostles just interesting history or should they constitute some kind of normative church practice?

The church's problem has been compounded because the New Testament has almost nothing to say by way of direct command concerning church matters. Consequently, it has been common for believers to dismiss New Testament patterns for church practice as optional. For instance, Fee and Stuart, in *How*

*To Read The Bible For All Its 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.”<sup>1</sup> No one, for example, would advocate following Jephthah’s tragic 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 practice described in the New Testament.

Most churches still do follow some New Testament patterns. Our question is: Why not follow all of them? This book argues for consistency. The apostles had a definite and very particular way in which they organized churches. We are convinced that they intended for all congregations to follow these same apostolic traditions, for as long as the church exists.

There are certain things that all true churches focus on, regardless of whether Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal, Anglican, or whatever. Oxford University professor of ecclesiastical history, Stanley Greensdale, stated that “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.”<sup>2</sup> Our proposal is that the apostles knew the best context in which to achieve these objectives, and purposely patterned such for us in the churches they established.

## **Holding To Apostolic Traditions Is Logical**

In 1 Corinthians 4:16-17, we read that Paul planned to send Timothy to Corinth. Timothy was to remind the Corinthians of Paul’s life-style so that they could imitate him. The immediate context concerns Paul’s faithfulness in service and his humility as an apostle. Thus Paul wrote, “I urge you to imitate me. For this reason I am sending to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.”

Notice the uniformity of practice reflected in Paul’s words. His way of life in Christ was consistent with what he taught everywhere in every church. There was integrity. There were life-style traditions that grew out of Paul’s teachings. His belief determined his behavior. His doctrine naturally determined his duty. In similar fashion, the apostles’ beliefs about the function of the church would surely have affected the way they organized churches (form follows function). Though the direct import of 1 Corinthians 4 is far afield from church practice, to imitate the apostles’ ways regarding church life would also seem to be a wise choice for any fellowship.

If anyone truly understood the purpose of the church, surely it was the original apostles. They were hand picked and personally trained by Jesus for three years. After His resurrection, our Lord appeared to them over a forty day period (Ac 1:3). Finally, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to teach them things He had not taught them before (Jn 14-16). Thus, whatever Jesus had taught His apostles about the church was naturally reflected in the way they subsequently set up and organized churches.

In Titus 1:5, a passage that deals directly with church practice, Paul wrote, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished.” Titus 1 concerns the appointment of qualified elders in every city. It is evident from this passage that the apostles did indeed have a definite way they wanted certain things done regarding the church. It was not left up to each individual assembly to find its own way of doing things. There was obviously some kind of order, pattern, or tradition that was followed in organizing the churches. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 11:34 (a passage about the practice of the Lord’s Supper, another church life topic), Paul wrote, “The rest I will set in order when I come” (KJV, italics mine).

Southern Baptist theologian J. L. Dagg astutely wrote in 1858 that 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.”<sup>3</sup>

## Holding To Apostolic Traditions Is Praiseworthy

In 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, Paul again urged the Corinthians, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” The immediate context concerns seeking the good of others so as to glorify God and bring them to salvation (10:31 - 11:1). The word “follow” (1Co 11:1) is from *mimatai*, the basis for “mimic.” Paul wanted the Corinthian believers to imitate him in that regard. Apparently they were doing well in imitating him in other matters also, since Paul stated in the very next verse, “I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you” (11:2, NASV).

What is a tradition? The regular Greek word for “teaching” is *didaskalia* (the basis for “didactic”), but significantly that is not the word used here. Instead, *paradosis* (tradition) is used. Gordon Fee pointed out that although *paradosis* was a technical term in Judaism for oral transmission of religious instruction, in this context it almost certainly does not refer to teachings, but rather to religious traditions regarding worship.<sup>4</sup> The Greek word fundamentally means, “that which is passed on.”<sup>5</sup> That which was passed on could have been anything: custom, teaching, or even a person (in the sense of a betrayal or arrest).<sup>6</sup> This same Greek word (in verb form) is used in 1 Corinthians 11:23 with regard to the theology and practice of the Lord’s Supper (that it was passed on). In English usage, a tradition is generally thought of as a custom or a certain way of doing things. It is an inherited pattern of thought or action. A popular definition might be, “things people do on a regular basis.” A tradition is thus something that is passed on or handed down (either by example or explicit teaching). Here in 1 Corinthians 11, we see an apostle praising a church for holding to his traditions regarding worship.

Consider the word “everything” as Paul used it in 1 Corinthians 11:2. It means “all that exists,” or at least, “all that pertains to the subject.” When Paul wrote “everything” (1Co 11:2), what subjects did he have in mind? His use of the word “everything” certainly suggests that Paul’s intended application was larger than just the exhortation found in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 (evangelism). Might “everything” have also included church order? Indeed it did. Paul’s praise in 11:2 signals the beginning of a new topic: head coverings (11:3-16). This new subject is clearly in the realm of church practice. (It is beyond the scope of this chapter to deal with the correct application of this passage on head coverings, but whatever was appropriate for the church then is still true for us today).

What do the words “just as” (11:2) indicate about the extent of their compliance with Paul’s traditions? They adhered to every iota; it was sort of a photocopy effect! They were not willy-nilly about it. Paul praised them for holding to his traditions exactly as he had passed them on to them. The apostles evidently designed for churches to precisely mimic at least some of the traditions they established (here, head coverings). Yet the word “traditions” (11:2) is in the plural. Paul apparently had in mind more than the one tradition of head coverings.<sup>7</sup> Should we shut up our observance to this one tradition only, or should we follow all the patterns for church organization that can be observed on the pages of the New Testament?

Mosaic legislation was paradigmatic in nature. It was case law. Only a few, sample, legal examples were recorded by Moses. The believer was expected to apply those case studies to other areas of life not specifically mentioned. For instance, the corners of fields were to be left unharvested for the poor to gather and eat. Nothing was said about olive groves. Does this mean that a wheat farmer alone

was burdened with feeding the poor, but that the man with an olive grove could harvest every last olive? Certainly not. Every farmer, regardless of the crop, was to leave a similar portion of his harvest to meet the needs of the poor. Similarly, we argue that adherence to apostolic tradition is paradigmatic in nature. If we observe that the apostles were pleased when churches followed specific traditions (such as regarding head coverings), then we are expected to apply that example to other patterns we see modeled by the apostles in their establishment of churches.

An interesting paradox can be observed about tradition. The same word (*paradosis*) used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:2 was also used by Jesus in Matthew 15:1-3. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?” Jesus blasted the tradition of the Pharisees, but Paul blessed the Corinthians for following the traditions of an apostle. Pharisaic tradition broke the command of God. Apostolic tradition, however, is consistent with the commands of Jesus. Holding to the traditions of the apostles is thus praiseworthy, as proven by Paul’s praise for the Corinthians (11:2). We must be careful not to develop our own church traditions that might actually inhibit our ability to obey the commands of our Lord. Care must also be taken not to develop traditions that replace the original traditions of the apostles.

## **Holding To Apostolic Traditions Is To Be Universal**

Paul quieted those inclined to be contentious about head coverings by appealing to the universal practice of all the other churches: “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice — nor do the churches of God” (1Co 11:16). This final statement was designed to win over the contentious people and settle any argument. The point is that Paul expected all the churches to be doing the same thing. Just to realize that one was different was argument enough to silence opposition. Obviously, prior emphasis had been given to certain practices that were supposed to be done the same way, everywhere. Thus, 1 Corinthians 11:16 indicates a uniformity of practice in all New Testament churches.

In 1 Corinthians 14:33b-34 (another passage about church practice), Paul mentioned something else that was to be true universally: “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches” (italics mine). Regardless of the correct application of this verse, notice how Paul again appealed to a universal pattern that existed in all the churches as a basis for obedience.

Finally, note how Paul chided the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 14:36, “Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” The obvious answer to both questions is no. This further indicates a uniformity of practice among New Testament churches. The Corinthians were tempted to do something differently from what all the other churches were doing. Evidently all the churches were expected to follow the same patterns in their church meetings. These two questions were designed to keep the Corinthians in line with the practice of all the other churches. Holding to apostolic traditions (New Testament church patterns) was to be universal in the first century and, we argue, today as well.

Chinese house church pioneer Watchman Nee, in *The Church And The Work: Rethinking The Work*, wrote, “Acts is the ‘genesis’ of the church’s history, and the Church in the time of Paul is the ‘genesis’ of the Spirit’s work . . . We must return to ‘the beginning.’ Only what God has set forth as our example in the beginning is the eternal Will of God. It is the Divine standard and our pattern for all time . . . 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.”<sup>8</sup>

## **Holding To Apostolic Traditions Brings God’s Peaceful Presence**

“Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phlp 4:4-7). The main point of Philippians 4:4-7 is that by rejoicing in the Lord we can gain God’s peace, regardless of circumstances.

In the next paragraph (Phlp 4:8-9), the church at Philippi was given the recipe for how to have the God of Peace be with them. By extension, this can be true for our churches as well. Paul wrote, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”

The Philippians were instructed to put into practice whatever they learned, received, heard from Paul, or saw in Paul (Phlp 4:9). The primary application in context concerned imitating Christ’s humility, putting others first, and rejoicing in the Lord. By extension, could this whatever not also include the way we see in the New Testament that Paul organized churches? It is clear from Scripture how the apostles set up the early church. To bypass apostolic tradition in this area may be to also bypass some of God’s blessing. Could it be that those fellowships which also follow the apostle’s church practice may enjoy even more of God’s peaceful presence?

## **Holding To Apostolic Traditions Is Commanded**

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, the Thessalonian church was instructed to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (NASV). Here, the Thessalonians were specifically commanded to hold to the traditions (*paradosis*) of the apostles, whether received orally or in writing. The Twelve are not here today to teach us in person, by word of mouth, what to do. However, we do have letters that record their traditions (the New Testament). The overall context of 2 Thessalonians 2 refers to end-time events, not church practice. Yet the word “traditions” (2:15) is in the plural; the author had more in view than merely his traditional teaching about the second coming. Would it not also apply in principle to his traditions regarding church order, as patterned in the New Testament?

Interestingly, rather than “traditions,” the NIV renders this “teachings.” This may be because a tradition (*paradosis*) can include a teaching (*didaskalia*), and the immediate context concerned the apostles’ oral tradition about end-times (2Th 2:1-12). However, the KJV, ASV, RSV, and NASV all translate it as “traditions,” which is also a valid translation of *paradosis*. The import of the various “traditions” passages such as this must be grappled with. Many believers think that while apostolic traditions may be interesting, following them is never commanded. Yet what does 2 Thessalonians 2:15 indicate? Is adherence to apostolic traditions actually commanded or merely suggested? Significantly, it is clearly commanded. It is not just apostolic teachings to which we are to adhere, but also apostolic traditions (as revealed exclusively on the pages of Scripture). We are to follow the traditions of the apostles, not only in their theology, but also in their practice.

A similar attitude toward traditions is expressed in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-7a, “Keep away from every

brother who is idle and does not live according to the tradition you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example.” The specific context here refers to gainful employment versus being idle and lazy. In context, this tradition refers to a practice more so than a doctrine. The apostles clearly wanted the churches to follow their traditions (of both theology and practice). Should we limit those Biblical traditions that we follow only to eschatology and work habits?

Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island and of the first Baptist church in the Americas (1600s), is another example of a Christian leader who believed that churches should strive to follow as near as possible New Testament church forms and ordinances.<sup>9</sup> This belief led Williams to found the Rhode Island colony on the New Testament pattern of a separation between church and state.

## Consistency

What can be concluded about God’s interest in your church adhering to New Testament patterns for church practice? It seems to us that whatever was normative church practice for all the churches in the New Testament should be normative practice for churches today. Perhaps these patterns of church practice are part of what gave the early church the dynamic that today’s church has been missing for so long.

If the Bible directly commands something, then we obviously ought to follow that command. The fact is that the Bible commands adherence to the traditions of the apostles (2Th 2:15). The real 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 obvious, biblical, apostolic traditions for church practice that should still be followed by the church today? (Remember as you read over these that there is general consensus in scholarly circles, regardless of denomination, as to how the early church functioned).

- 1 The Lord’s Supper celebrated as a full fellowship meal (1Co 11:17-34), partaken of weekly (Ac 20:7, 1Co 11:17-22), as the main reason for gathering each week (Ac 20:7, 1Co 11:33).
- 2 Participatory church meetings (1Co 14:26, 37, Heb 10:24-25), with mutual edification, encouragement and fellowship as the goals of the assembly (Ac 2:42, 1Co 14:3-5, 12, 26, Heb 10:24-25).
- 3 Church government by consensus: elder led more so than elder ruled churches (Lk 22:24-27, 1Pe 5:1-4). Further, church elders are to be male, plural, non-hierarchical, homegrown, servant leadership (1Ti 3:1-7).
4. Home sized churches, i.e., smaller congregations (Ro 16:5, Col 4:15, Phlm 2), that are one in attitude with all other believers and congregations. There is nothing magic about meeting in a home *per se*; it’s what happens there that matters, and it happens best in a smaller church. The New Testament norm is many micro churches rather than a few mega churches.
5. Meeting regularly on the Lord’s Day (Mt 28:1-7, Ac 20:7, 1Co 16:1-4, Re 1:9-11), the first day of the week, in honor of Jesus’ resurrection.
6. Children present with their parents in the church meeting (Mt 19:13-15, Lk 2:41-50, Ac 21:5, Ep 6:1-3, Col 4:16). Thus, churches that strengthen and unite families, not further divide them.
7. A community-based church that can easily experience daily fellowship (Ac 2:42-47).
8. Church reproduction and equipping through the ministry of itinerant church workers such as apostles, pastor-teachers, or evangelists (Ep 4:11-13). Such ministers may well have large ministry meetings that support, but do not supplant, the regular, participatory meetings of the local church.
9. Regular ministry meetings specifically devoted to the in-depth teaching of the scriptures (Ac 2:42, 15:32, 20:7, Ro 12:7, 1Ti 5:17).

What we argue for here is consistency. Most churches already follow some of these patterns, but not all. Again we wonder why not? 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 since the apostles evidently expected for all churches to follow their traditions just as they were handed down (1Co 11:2).

## Dangers

**Lifelessness.** Critical to any outworking of church life is first having an inner life to work out! Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10). A wine bottle is nearly worthless without wine in it. Similarly, 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, 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 with the outward form whatever they please. To be bound by the ways of the apostles is seen as mindless aping. Once a person is truly centered in Christ, he is supposedly free to make his own applications. However, no less a spiritual authority than Jesus Himself warned that pouring wine into the wrong container could lead to the loss of the wine (Mt 9:17). Do we really know better than the apostles how to organize churches? Specifically with reference to church practice, Paul admonished, “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (1Co 14:37).

Occasionally believers will overreact to the stifling bureaucracy of some conventional churches, and become anarchists. In their idealism, they become anti-organizational. They feel that the visible and physical inevitably work against the invisible and spiritual. This is a false dichotomy. It is similar in error to those who claimed that Jesus could not be sinless since he was born of flesh, or that if sinless He could not actually have been incarnate. The New Testament church was quite organized, and faithfulness to our Lord’s requirements will necessitate our churches being organized as well.

**Legalism.** Are there justified exceptions to following New Testament patterns? Yes. Just as the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27), so too people are more important than rigid adherence to New Testament patterns. In qualifying these exceptions, London house church pastor Beresford Job cautions, “We must make sure that we don’t let deviations from the norm, done because of extenuating circumstances, actually become the norm. Take water baptism for example. Although its actual mode isn’t anywhere commanded, we know from the way the early church did it (apostolic tradition again) that it was done upon conversion by immersion. (Immersion is also what the actual word baptizo means). In order for it to be based on the New Testament pattern, a person’s baptism should be after his profession of faith by full submersion under water. But suppose a bedridden quadriplegic comes to the Lord. Baptism by immersion would clearly be out of the question. To come up with another, more appropriate, mode of baptism would arguably be quite permissible. Although technically out of step with the example of Scripture, it would still be fully submitted in intention and spirit. Yet none of what I have just said could possibly apply to the baptism of an able bodied person — the normal mode would have to be employed in order for things to be as the Lord wants.”

Church renewal advocate Darryl Erkel has appropriately 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!”

If the Bible is silent about something — if there is neither command nor pattern to follow — then we have the freedom to do whatever suits us (following the leading of the Holy Spirit). We do not advocate a negative hermeneutic, insisting that if a practice is not found in the Bible, then we can't do it. Rather, we promote a normative hermeneutic, insisting that we should hold to those practices that clearly were normative for the early church. Matters of silence are matters of freedom.

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 sandals and togas, writing on parchment, studying by oil lamps, etc.). The key is to focus in 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.

## Concluding Comments

- God directs by biblical pattern (tradition) as well as by biblical precept (teaching).
- The patterns for church practice found in the New Testament are generally to be followed by the church of all ages.
- Apostolic tradition (as found only in the Bible) is perfectly consistent with apostolic teaching.
- The most important traditions for New Testament life church are the celebration of the Lord's Supper weekly as a full fellowship meal (1Co 11), regular participatory church meetings (1Co 14), church government by consensus (elder led more so than elder ruled, Lk 22:24ff), and living room sized churches (Ro 16:5).
- 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. Certainly there will be similarity in the basics, but there is also freedom within the boundaries of the form.
- Biblical house churches are not nearly so program or building oriented as are many conventional churches. Because of this, some have mistakenly concluded that biblically-based house churches are unorganized. Faithfulness to our Lord and His Word necessarily results in a church that follows God's complete pattern for His church. Home churches may not be institutional, but they are to be organized. Following the traditions laid down by the apostles means that house churches are to have definite leaders, regular and orderly meetings, solid theology proper, active church discipline, and weekly Lord's Supper celebrations.
- Without Christ at the center of things, these patterns become legalism and death, a hollow form, an empty shell (Jn 15:5). We need the proper wine skin, but more importantly we need the wine. Both have their place. Either one without the other is problematic (Lk 5:36-38).

Remember the earlier quote by Professors Fee and Stuart that what is merely narrated or described

can never function in a normative way? In the second edition of their book, they changed their statement somewhat. 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.”<sup>10</sup> We have attempted to demonstrate that the apostles did indeed design for churches to follow the patterns they laid down for church order.

Why is that the majority of church leaders have not adopted the practice of the early church? Is it because they have studied the passages presented here and rejected our applications? Our own experience has been that very little attention is paid in seminary to the role that apostolic traditions should play. We suspect that many pastors have simply adopted the historical traditions inherited from their denomination. Many churches today are firmly entrenched in cultural church traditions that were developed after the close of the apostolic era. In such cases, there is danger of nullifying the inspired tradition of the apostles for the sake of more modern tradition (Mt 15:1-3).

We resonate with the sentiments of Jim Elliot, missionary and martyr, who wrote, “The pivot point hangs on whether or not God has revealed a universal pattern for the church in the New Testament. If He has not, then anything will do so long as it works. But I am convinced that nothing so dear to the heart of Christ as His Bride should be left without explicit instructions as to her corporate conduct. I am further convinced that the 20th century has in no way simulated this pattern in its method of ‘churching’ a community . . . it is incumbent upon me, if God has a pattern for the church, to find and establish that pattern, at all costs.”<sup>11</sup>

— Steve Atkerson

## Notes

- 1 Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 97.
- 2 Stanley Lawrence Greensdale, “Early Christian Church,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. Warren Preece, Vol. 7 (Chicago: William Benton, Publisher, 1973), 844.
- 3 J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology: A Treatise on Church Order* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 84-86.
- 4 Gordon Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament, The First Epistle to The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 499.
- 5 Fritz Rienecker, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 423.
- 6 Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich & Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 615.
- 7 Fee, 500.
- 8 Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: International Students Press, 1969), 8-9.
- 9 Edwin Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams In America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 106.
- 10 Fee & Stuart, 2nd Ed., 106.
- 11 Elizabeth Elliot, *Shadow of The Almighty: Life and Testimony of Jim Elliot* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1989), 138-139.

## Discussion Questions

1. Suppose it were possible to write to the original apostles, asking them about church life. Do you suppose they would answer back that they expected you to follow their examples regarding church practice, or would they have encouraged you to follow a way of your own devising? Explain.
2. How can the axiom form follows function be applied to the way that the apostles first set up and organized churches?
3. What passages in the New Testament indicate whether there was a basic uniformity of practice in all New Testament churches or whether each was unique and different?
4. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for holding to their traditions (Mt 15), but Paul praised the Corinthians for holding to his traditions (1Co 11). Why the difference?
5. Why is it important to make a distinction between apostolic tradition, as found within the New Testament, and the later tradition of the church fathers, as found in history? Which should be given preference? Why?
6. 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)?
7. How might Philippians 4:9 apply today with respect to the way that Paul organized churches?
8. What gave the apostles authority to establish patterns that all churches are obliged to follow? Jn 13:20, 15:20, Ac 1:1-3, 2:42.
9. 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, dressing in togas, etc.)?
10. Jesus washed His disciples' feet and the Jerusalem church practiced communalism. How can we determine what is and is not intended to be an apostolic tradition?
11. What are some of the apostolic traditions for church practice that are often neglected today?
12. What should we make of the fact that there is general scholarly consensus regarding the actual practice of the early church?
13. 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?
14. Some think it folly to try to recreate the "primitive" first-century church, since it was far from perfect. God expected His church to mature, to grow up, beyond the infancy state, they say. As much as anything, early believers are seen as examples of how not to function as a church. Besides, it is argued, 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?
15. Why is historical church tradition often given preference over New Testament historical tradition?
16. Does the church you fellowship with give careful attention to New Testament patterns, ignore them almost totally, or select cafeteria style which apostolic examples will be followed? How do you feel about this?

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Want help teaching this topic? To aid you in leading others to the truths of New Testament church life, teaching notes have been prepared for this subject. They will give you ideas on how to lead an interactive (Socratic) group discussion. The idea is to guide people to discover for themselves what the

New Testament says about this topic. At the end of the guide there are study questions to pass (or e-mail) out in advance.

[Just click here!](#)

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## **Steve Atkerson**

Steve and his wife Sandra live in Georgia. God blessed them with three children, two still at home and one married. Steve is a graduate of Georgia Tech and worked for several years in industrial electronics before heading off to seminary. While in seminary he was on the part-time staff of a 14,000 member mega-church. After receiving a Master of Divinity degree from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, he served on the pastoral staff of a Southern Baptist Church with a membership of around 1000 folks. After seven years in the traditional pastorate, he resigned to begin working with churches that desire to follow apostolic traditions in their church practice. He thus has transitioned all the way from mega churches to micro churches! Since 1990 he has traveled and taught about the practice of the early church as the Lord opens doors of opportunity. Steve is an elder at a local house church, is president of NTRF, edited *Toward A House Church Theology*, authored both *The Practice of the Early Church: A Theological Workbook* and *The Equipping Manual*, and is editor of and a contributing author to both *Ekklesia: To The Roots of Biblical House Church Life* and *House Church: Simple, Strategic, Scriptural*.

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