

The Early Church—what to learn from, what to follow

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What does the New Testament Church teach us?

As we read Acts and the early letters of Paul, we see the people of the early church selling everything, constantly in worship, doing miracles. Does that mean we should do these things also?

The history of the early church is no doubt exciting, as they worked miracles, held everything in common and lived a life of continual worship.

However, a key question for us living today is which of their actions should we follow as a normative command for the church today—meaning we should keep doing it because they did it and what should we understand simply as a history of the birth of the church, something to learn from in principle, but not necessarily a practice to precisely follow?

This is not a merely intellectual question

It is one that has divided denominations and caused no end of misunderstanding in churches when it touches on topics such as:

Infant or adult baptism

The method and frequency of communion or the Lord's Supper

The place of miracles and healing

Of communal living and sharing

Whether women can teach or not

This week we will take a thoughtful study of what should guide us in our behavior and attitudes towards those who follow the Lord in a way that differs from our preferences.

And how we should live no matter which way we observe secondary issues

As a given—

We all want to please the Lord

It's hard to argue against people who use as the reason why they follow different practices in their churches when they say:

"Well that's how they did it in the early church." or "The pure and early form of Christianity did it this way...."

We must put aside pre-conceived ideas and actually read the Bible—much is simply there in the grammar of the text

For example in I Cor. 11—the plain text says, "a woman should have her head covered *when* she prays or prophesies"—obviously, they were doing that in the church and this passage shows it should

be done in the historically proper way to show respect in a religious setting

An additional resource

Guided by an excellent book I've mentioned a number of times—*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Fee and Stuart

We'll look at some of the general guidelines they give, then attempt to apply them at some early NT books, 1 & 2 Thessalonians and 1 & 2 Corinthians AND the passages in Acts that gives us the setting for the development of each church

Finally we'll make some application comments

General Principles from Fee and Stuart

From 4 chapters a summary of some key thoughts: Important to distinguish between

WHAT HAPPENED

and

WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN

WHAT HAPPENED

- These are historical documents, written to specific churches during a specific time
- As such we need to sort out the historical and cultural settings
- Many incidents that are talked about happened at THAT time and sometimes only at THAT church
- This is obvious when a different issue is talked about in a different way or mentioned only once
- Just because something happened does not necessarily mean it should continue to happen
- This would be things talked about once in the historical book of acts, but not recommended in Paul's letters

For example:

- Acts 2:44-47: ***They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.***

A number of things going on here that were not commanded and not done in most churches today:

- Communal living, support
- Meeting in the Temple
- Daily interactions

Eventually out of the Temple and back to work, but a very joyful, communal start to the church

For situations like this (and there are many) we are told things the early churches did—but we are not commanded to do likewise

However, there are often some principles even in

historical passages that we are encouraged to continue such as always caring for each others needs

Some historical mentions never repeated or explained

1 Cor. 15:29 **Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?**

This verse is never explained, repeated, commanded to follow elsewhere.

We have no idea what he is referring to

Passages like these we need to read as a historical reference, not as commanded practice or basis for an entire theology as do the Mormons on

What they say about it:

For those who have passed on without the ordinance of baptism, proxy baptism for the deceased is a free will offering. According to Church doctrine, a departed soul in the afterlife is completely free to accept or reject such a baptism — the offering is freely given and must be freely received. The ordinance does not force deceased persons to become members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or “Mormons,” nor does the Church list deceased persons as members of the Church. In short, there is no change in the religion or heritage of the recipient or of the recipient’s descendants — the notion of coerced conversion is utterly contrary to Church doctrine.

Of course, proxy baptism for the deceased is nothing new. It was mentioned by Paul in the New Testament (see 1 Corinthian 15:29) and was practiced by groups of early Christians. As part of a restoration of New Testament Christianity, Latter-day Saints continue this practice. All Church members are instructed to submit names for proxy baptism only for their own deceased relatives as an offering of familial love. Baptisms for the dead are performed only in temples.

<https://www.mormonnewsroom.ca/article/baptism-for-the-dead>

NONE of the added theology is anywhere in the Bible and it is not practiced in Biblical Christian churches.

WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN

These are actions that we are told about in the historical passages of Acts and the epistles, but they go further in these ways:

The actions are talked about in numerous other passages

The actions are commanded

Examples: the Lord’s Supper—mentioned in many different passages, 1 Cor. 11, how it should be done.

But even here—not commanded when, where, how, or even who should administer it

The core action is primary, the other details secondary

When we make the distinction between WHAT HAPPENED and WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN it helps us determine:

As with the example of communion:

What is primary

What is secondary

“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things Charity”

Essentials: Jesus is Lord, one person of the Triune God of Father, Son, and Holy, that He was virgin born, lived, died and rose for our salvation and is coming again; the only Savior and Lord

Non-essentials: method of baptism, tongues and various spiritual gifts, manner and frequency of communion, drinking wine, place of women in the church

How does this apply in early books?

1 & 2 Thessalonians –written by Paul from Corinth, about AD 51, one of the earliest books

Thessalonica, a seaport, center of trade routes

Story of founding the church of Thessalonica in Acts

17 Now they (Paul and Silas) traveled through the cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As was Paul’s custom, he went there to preach, and for three Sabbaths in a row he opened the Scriptures to the people, ³ explaining the prophecies about the sufferings of the Messiah and his coming back to life, and proving that Jesus is the Messiah. ⁴ Some who listened were persuaded and became converts—including a large number of godly Greek men and also many important women of the city.

⁵ But the Jewish leaders were jealous and incited some worthless fellows from the streets to form a mob and start a riot. They attacked the home of Jason, planning to take Paul and Silas to the City Council for punishment.

⁶ Not finding them there, they dragged out Jason and some of the other believers, and took them before the Council instead. “Paul and Silas have turned the rest of the world upside down, and now they are here disturbing our city,” they shouted, ⁷ “and Jason has let them into his home. They are all guilty of treason, for they claim another king, Jesus, instead of Caesar.”

⁸⁻⁹ The people of the city, as well as the judges, were concerned at these reports and let them go only after they had posted bail.

¹⁰ That night the Christians hurried Paul and Silas to Berea, and, as usual, they went to the synagogue to preach. ¹¹ But the people of Berea were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and gladly listened to the message. They searched the Scriptures day by day to check up on Paul and Silas' statements to see if they were really so. ¹² As a result, many of them believed, including several prominent Greek women and many men also. ¹³ But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching in Berea, they went over and stirred up trouble. ¹⁴ The believers acted at once, sending Paul on to the coast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. Acts 17 Living Bible (TLB)

But things have changed by the time he writes his letter to them

He commends them for their faith, "*1 Thes. 1:2 We always thank God for you and pray for you constantly. 3 We never forget your loving deeds as we talk to our God and Father about you, and your strong faith and steady looking forward to the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"

He goes on to commend them some more, but then goes on to answer their questions, primary one about those who have died before Jesus' return.

Key passage

1 Thes. 4:13 And now, dear brothers, I want you to know what happens to a Christian when he dies so that when it happens, you will not be full of sorrow, as those are who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and then came back to life again, we can also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him all the Christians who have died.

15 I can tell you this directly from the Lord: that we who are still living when the Lord returns will not rise to meet him ahead of those who are in their graves. 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a mighty shout and with the soul-stirring cry of the archangel and the great trumpet-call of God. And the believers who are dead will be the first to rise to meet the Lord. 17 Then we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and remain with him forever. 18 So comfort and encourage each other with this news.

With that assurance in mind, he then tells them how to live as they wait

1 Thes. 5:13 Live in peace with each other. 14 And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but

always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Then in 2nd Thessalonians they other questions and challenges

They understood part of what they were told about the Lord coming back, but some decided they would simply wait around for Him

Paul's answer to that:

2 Thes 3:8 "we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. 9 We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

11 We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. 12 Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. 13 And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.

When we get to Corinthians, many issues

Written by Paul to a major, seaport, very wealthy, cosmopolitan city, sometimes described as "New York, LA, and Las Vegas in one"

Start of the church

- Paul's founding of the church described in Acts 18
- After a short stay in Athens, went to Corinth
- *Each Sabbath found Paul at the synagogue, trying to convince the Jews and Greeks alike. 5 And after the arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia, Paul spent his full time preaching and testifying to the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. 6 But when the Jews opposed him and blasphemed, hurling abuse at Jesus, Paul shook off the dust from his robe and said, "Your blood be upon your own heads—I am innocent—from now on I will preach to the Gentiles."*

- *7 After that he stayed with Titus Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God and lived next door to the synagogue. 8 However, Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and all his household believed in the*

Lord and were baptized—as were many others in Corinth.

- ⁹ One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, “Don’t be afraid! Speak out! Don’t quit!” ¹⁰ For I am with you and no one can harm you. Many people here in this city belong to me.” ¹¹ So Paul stayed there the next year and a half, teaching the truths of God.
- Joined by Aquilla and Priscilla, who left Rome because of persecution, also tentmakers
- Later joined by Apollos—gospel clarified to him by Aquilla and Priscilla and he becomes a leader in the church

After Paul leaves, lots of problems so they write to him

- Fights about leadership
- Sexual immorality
- Lawsuits
- Problems with worship—some going hungry, some getting drunk
- Issues about women in the church (one verse only of a really big discussion)
- *Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. 1 Corinthians 11:4-5 (NIV)*
- Great example of cultural telling what happens, not for all time what should happen

A modern application of a secondary issue that is a defining part of a denomination

- Why would not the Quaker remove his hat in the presence of ladies or men of note, or in his own meetings for worship? As with other curious Quaker customs, this, too, had its meaning. To lift or doff the hat was once a sign of servile regard, or at least of personal respect. With his firm belief in the absolute equality of man, the Quaker continued to wear his hat, seeing no reason why he should remove it even during a sermon, for such came from the lips of a man; but when he addressed God in prayer, then all arose, removed their hats and stood uncovered before one supreme being. <http://iagenweb.org/history/qoi/QOIPt5Chp4.htm>
- I would suggest, it really doesn’t matter—but if it matters to them, we treat the custom respectfully
- Funny when we see it sometimes—story of Falwell and Warren and the suit and Hawaiian shirt

Many examples like the Quaker one in denominations—so what should we do?

- Where something is shared in the Bible, especially if only mentioned once—it is there to tell us what happened, **not what we are to do**
- *Because something happened in the early church*

does not give it special power or meaning—if anything, many of the actions were transitional (eg all things in common) or to use a modern term “baby steps”

- In Corinth and Thessalonica, lots of really bad examples are given, but the Bible isn’t about the bad examples of people, but of God’s grace
- I think He has given us all this history of the early church, not so we will copy the early church, thinking that they are the greatest
- But that we will praise God, who in His kindness and love saved all of them, welcomed them into His church as He does for all of us.
- We learn that we don’t start the Christian life perfectly, but that we are still part of the Church, the Body of Christ because of what Jesus did

And though we grant grace to all for transitional, baby steps in their lives and ours—let’s end with this repeated application

- *1 Thes: 5:13 Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.*
- *¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in all circumstances. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.*
- *²³ May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- *²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.*
- *Remember the story of Peter, who thought he could walk on water and how when he was sinking, Jesus pulled him up*
- *He is always there for us!*

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