

Just Christians

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A few days ago, I stumbled across a blog entry written by a man who is a Methodist and a member of the faculty at SMU, in which he described a Sunday visit to a church of Christ. If you're curious, you can find the blog entry at <http://heartcoremethodist.org/2011/03/07/why-the-churches-of-christ-were-right-after-all/#more-70>. As you might guess from the blog title, he was quite complimentary. Over and over again, he emphasized how much he appreciated the simplicity of the service and its emphasis on first-century Christianity.

As is often the case, I found his outsider's perspective to be very interesting. It reminded me of something that I too easily forget. We don't do what we do here because it's what we've always done. Instead, we do it because we want to strip away 2000 years of human innovation and return to the simple worship and faith of the very first Christians, nothing more, nothing less. Our goal is to honor God and Him only, by obeying only His commands. Achieving this goal is a journey, not an event. After all, the more we study the word of God, the more clearly we understand what He wants. However, it's a journey well worth taking. Let's look at what it means for us to be just Christians.

Is It Possible?

Before we consider the implications of being just Christians, though, we must first ask whether it is even possible. Can we, now nearly 2000 years removed from the first Christians, discover and imitate enough of their practices that we can honestly claim to be like them? I think the answer to the question is "That depends," and what it depends on is our attitude toward God's word. If we want to be like the first-century church, we must approach the Bible in certain ways.

The first of these attitudes is that we must **DO ALL IN JESUS' NAME**. Paul emphasizes this in Colossians 3:17. In Scripture, it is nearly always the case that when we're talking about the name of Jesus, we're not talking about the word "Jesus" itself. Instead, "name" is the first-century way of saying "authority," and Paul is telling us that we must do everything by the authority of Jesus. In other words, we have to accept that Jesus has the right to tell us what to do, and that we don't have the right to go beyond the revelation of Scripture and do things that He didn't tell us to do.

Whatever they may claim, it is evident from the actions of the denominational world that they are not concerned with doing everything according to the authority of Jesus. Jesus never told anyone to establish a denominational structure or hierarchy, yet they have both. Jesus never told His church to found universities or write creeds, yet there are churches that do all of these things. They honor Him with their lips, yet their hearts and actions are far from Him.

Of course, this condemnation hinges on one crucial point. We can only accuse the denominational world of disobedience if it is possible to obey. We can only say that they are rejecting the authority of Jesus if Jesus has used that authority to tell us what He does want us to do. This is why it's important that God's word urges us to **FOLLOW THE PATTERN**. Look at 2 Timothy 1:13. Paul didn't regard his teaching as a bunch of unrelated commandments. Instead, it formed a pattern of behavior that God expected His people, both individually and as a church, to follow. This means that the commandments and the examples of the New Testament all reveal some part of the overall pattern. When Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 16 to take up a collection on the first day of the week, he didn't say that on his own. Instead, he repeated the pattern that God had shown him. When the first-century Christians obeyed Paul, they followed the pattern. 2000 years later, when we obey, we are following the pattern like they did.

This raises another question. In the first century, the teaching of the apostles constituted a pattern of sound words. We have only a small portion of everything the apostles said recorded in the word. That being the case, do we have enough in the word that we can re-create that first-century pattern? By the word's own witness, the answer to the question is yes. We can re-create the pattern if we **LEARN FROM THE SCRIPTURE**. Consider 2 Timothy 3:16-17. There are two points we must address here. First, all Scripture is from God, so everything we read in the Bible is reliable evidence of the divine will. Second, the Scripture is capable of making us complete and equipping us for every good work. If this is true, then it must also be that the Scripture contains and reveals every good work. Sure, we don't have every word the apostles uttered written down for us. However, we do have every word we need to know to please God. We don't have to worry about gaps in the pattern if we faithfully follow the word. The Scriptures are complete.

Fourth, if we want to build a church that is according to God's pattern and not man's pattern, we must **SET OUR MINDS** on the things above. Consider Paul's words in Colossians 3:1-2. If our minds are truly set on the things of heaven, our only goal will be to follow the pattern that has been revealed from heaven. On the other hand, when we seek to introduce earthly things into the heavenly pattern, that shows that our minds have become focused on the things of the earth. Every departure from the truth is the result of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, or the pride of life, especially pride. When men decide that they can improve on the simple structure of the first-century church by banding together in a denomination, that's pride. When men decide that they can improve on the simple worship of the first-century church by introducing elements that the early Christians never knew, that's pride. When men decide that they can

improve on the simple work of the first-century church by having the church take on “good works” that the first-century church did not do, that’s pride. True humility looks only to God. True humility seeks only to follow God’s pattern.

If we want to follow that pattern, we must learn to **TEST ALL THINGS**. Let’s read together from 1 Thessalonians 5:21. To put it another way, before we decide to do something, we have to examine the evidence and determine that it is lawful. We can’t assume that. We have to test it. This viewpoint doesn’t have many adherents in the religious world, but it’s the way that mankind does nearly everything else. For example, if we’re buying a car, do we want a car that the manufacturer asserts and assumes is reliable, or do we want a car that the manufacturer has tested and proven to be reliable? If we’re on a jury, do we want to see the prosecutor assert and assume that the defendant is guilty, or do we want to see him prove that, using evidence that has been tested and found to be valid?

We must remember that in the spiritual realm, the baseline for these tests is that we presume a given practice is invalid. Here’s why: As we’ve seen already, the word contains the complete pattern for the Lord’s church. Anything that is a part of that pattern is going to be in the word. Logically, then, something that isn’t in the word isn’t part of the pattern. It is therefore correct for us to conclude that a given practice isn’t part of the pattern until and unless we find that practice in the word. It’s not our responsibility to prove things unlawful. Instead, we must prove them lawful.

The Lord’s Supper

If we apply these principles rigorously, we will indeed be just Christians. Our worship and work will be the same as the worship and work of the first-century church, uncorrupted by human arrogance. As an illustration of how this works in practice, we’re going to consider the Lord’s Supper. This will remind us of why we do what we do and help us to prepare our minds for its observance. We first encounter the concept of the Lord’s Supper when we read about its **INSTITUTION**. Mark describes this in Mark 14:22-24. The circumstances here are quite simple. Jesus and His closest disciples are eating the Passover meal together, mere hours before His betrayal, trial, and death. Jesus knows what is about to happen, so He takes two of the foods that were part of the Passover, unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine, and distributes them to His disciples. He informs them that the bread is His body, which is about to be slain on their behalf. Likewise, the cup represents His blood, which would be shed to inaugurate a new covenant between God and man. Jesus did this both to illustrate what He was about to do, and, after His death, to memorialize what He had already done. He expected all of His followers to use this simple ritual meal to remember Him.

We learn about the **TIMING** of the Lord’s Supper ceremony from Acts 20:7. The first portion of this timing is that the disciples of the church in Troas gathered together to break bread with Paul on the first day of the week. Remember, friends: during this portion of Paul’s third missionary journey, he is in a tearing hurry to make it back to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. However, he delays his journey for almost a full week, so that he can be a part of this assembly on the first day of the week. Early Christians ate the Lord’s Supper on the Lord’s Day, and we should too.

Second, this passage tells us that early Christians partook of the Lord’s Supper as part of a gathering that had come together for that purpose. The only time in Scripture when we don’t see Christians eating the Lord’s Supper together is in 1 Corinthians 11, and Paul rebukes the Corinthians there because they didn’t. We must recognize that God expects us, too, to eat the Lord’s Supper together, as a visible symbol of our unity in Christ.

It is also from 1 Corinthians 11 that we learn about the **FORM** that the Lord’s Supper was to take. Let’s read from 1 Corinthians 11:34. In addition to treating the Lord’s Supper as an opportunity to display their factional differences, the Corinthians also used it to emphasize differences in wealth. The rich brought their own food and drink to the Lord’s Supper, and some of them imbibed to the point of drunkenness. On the other end of the scale, the poor were left without so much as a crumb that they could use to partake. Because of these abuses, Paul decreed that this memorial feast was no longer to be treated as a common meal. This is why in our observance, we take only a small portion of the bread and the fruit of the vine. We’re here to remember Jesus, not to eat.

Indeed, what is most important about the Lord’s Supper occurs not outwardly, but inwardly. Paul tells us that our **APPROACH** to the sacred meal is extremely important. Let’s read together from 1 Corinthians 11:27-28. There are several different ways we could violate this passage and partake of the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy fashion. First, the Scripture tells us in Hebrews 10 that when we sin willfully, we count the blood of the covenant as an unclean thing. If we are living a hypocritical life, if we are despising the blood that Jesus shed as unclean, how could we dare allow the fruit of the vine that represents that blood to pass our lips? That would be piling sin upon sin. However, hypocrisy is far from the only way to partake in an unworthy manner. If we partake mechanically, thoughtlessly, going through the motions like we do every Sunday, that is equally unworthy of the greatness of Christ’s sacrifice. Instead, the Scripture requires us to partake mindfully, to remember what Jesus has done for us, and to examine ourselves, to see if we are faithful to the covenant that His blood sealed. Only as we do that are we celebrating the feast in sincerity and truth.

Finally, we must be mindful of the **PURPOSE** of the Lord’s Supper. Paul explains that purpose in 1 Corinthians 11:26. In worldly terms, this should make sense to us. We often remember those who die heroically, especially those who die to save the lives of others. Each year, we dedicate Memorial Day to remember the men and women who died in

defense of our country. However, we've already seen that God wants the Lord's Supper to be a weekly observance. It's a memorial that's supposed to be part of the fabric of our lives, because what we are remembering is so very important. Jesus didn't die to save our lives. He died to save our souls, and He was the only One who could.

However, the Lord's Supper doesn't only look backward to Jesus' death. It looks forward to His triumphant return in the clouds, when His triumph over His enemies will be made complete and all those who have loved Him will be vindicated. We remember the one with sorrow and thanksgiving, and we anticipate the other with hope and joy. When we share in this love feast, our thoughts should be as rich as the meal is simple, as we come together to honor Him.

The Assembly

As we have seen, we insist that if we want to be just Christians, we must follow the pattern that God has laid down in His word. Likewise, we claim that we are following that pattern. What, then, about the things we do that don't appear explicitly in the word? There aren't any clear examples of church buildings in the word. We don't read about baptisteries or pitch pipes or pews or many other things that we use in our assemblies. What about those things?

That's an important question, but it does have an answer, and we're going to illustrate that answer as we consider the assembly. The key concept here is the concept of **EXPEDIENTS**. We see an illustration of expedients in Acts 16:9-11. The first question we have to ask is why we don't see God roasting Paul with a lightning bolt here. After all, Paul got on a boat to go to Macedonia, and God didn't say anything about boats. So... is Paul violating the pattern in sailing?

That's a silly question, and we all know the answer. God isn't roasting Paul for disobeying His commands because Paul isn't actually disobeying. God said "Come to Macedonia" to Paul, and Paul IS coming. Paul merely chose to use a sailboat as a way to do it. That's the concept of an expedient in a nutshell. Sometimes, God tells us both what to do and how to do it. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 16, God supplies both the what—lay by in store—and the how—on the first day of the week. In that case, it would be going beyond the pattern to lay by in store for the Lord's work on a day other than the first day of the week. When God gives us a what and a how, he wants to see both what and how out of us.

Conversely, sometimes God gives us a what, but He doesn't give us a how. For instance, 1 Timothy 4 tells us to give attention to the public reading of Scripture. However, unlike giving of our means, there is no day of the week specified. We have to do it, but God doesn't tell us how we have to do it. When there is no how specified, we don't throw up our hands in despair and go home. Instead, we understand that we have freedom to choose our own how. We can read the Bible together one day a week, all seven days a week, or anywhere in between, as long as we're giving attention to it sometime. In areas like that, where we have a what but not a how, the how that we choose is an expedient.

This freedom to choose our own expedients when God speaks generally has a couple of limitations. First, the expedient that we choose must be **ORDERLY**. Look at 1 Corinthians 14:40. Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul reveals that God is a God of peace, not of confusion, and so it is never appropriate to worship or serve Him in a confused way. Thus, we are responsible for choosing methods of worship that lead to an orderly, decent assembly. This allows us, for instance, to designate certain times on Sunday and Wednesday as our times of assembly. That way, there isn't any confusion about when other Christians are going to be at the church building. We don't have people randomly wandering by from 6 in the morning till 10 at night. Instead, we can all be here together to edify one another. That's only one example of many that are possible, but it illustrates the general principle. In all things, God wants us to be orderly.

Second, the expedients that we choose must be **FOR GOD'S GLORY**. Peter raises this point about our service in 1 Peter 4:11. The point here is that in everything that we do for God, in every way that we obey Him, we must strive to do the very best job that we can, because that's the effort that best glorifies Him. Anything, then, that helps us do a better job of carrying out His will is something that we should embrace. For example, even though there isn't a single example in Scripture of a preacher using PowerPoint, I use PowerPoint in nearly all the sermons that I preach here. Why? Because, as all of our teachers here will tell you, people have different learning styles. Some people learn better by hearing; others learn better by seeing. Therefore, when I both preach the sermon and put information on the screen behind me, I'm appealing to two different learning styles, and I'm making it easier for the congregation to learn. There can be no doubt that a better presentation of God's word glorifies Him, so the slide show is an acceptable way to serve.

Next, we're going to look at a couple of applications of these principles. Let's look first at **ASSEMBLING** itself. God gives us the command to assemble in Hebrews 10:25. That's the what. Other passages of Scripture reveal that God is indifferent to the how of location. Early Christians assembled in the temple, in upper rooms, in synagogues, in schools, and on riverbanks, just to name a few locations. God clearly cared about the what, not the how. Our circumstances, though, limit the locations where we can assemble. There are too many members of this church for us to assemble in one another's homes. We can't assemble outside because an outside assembly in the winter would quite literally kill several of our members. There isn't anyone in the area who will give us indoor space to assemble regularly free of charge. We're left then, with two options. Either we buy or rent a place of assembly, like this church building, or we don't assemble. That choice is no choice at all. God expects the what of assembling. As long as we obey, He doesn't care how.

The subject of **SINGING** will illustrate some other aspects of expediency. For starters, we see the command to sing in Colossians 3:16. The what is plain: sing to one another. There are a lot of hows that we have chosen to accompany this what: hymnals, songleaders, and pitch pipes, to name a few. I've never heard anyone argue that God requires the use of hymnals, songleaders, or pitch pipes. We could praise Him without them. However, we choose to use them anyway because we believe that they make our worship more orderly and help us to better glorify Him.

That only raises another question, though. Why do we say that hymnals, songleaders, and pitch pipes are OK, but a piano accompaniment isn't OK? We can say that the first are aids and the latter is an addition, but that's an assertion, not an argument. Is there a difference between those two categories? If so, what is it?

First of all, we have to acknowledge that there must be a way to draw a line between something that is an aid, something that is a useful way of obeying God, and something that is an addition, a human invention that is masquerading as an expedient. Otherwise, people could say things like, "We're installing a worldwide denominational hierarchy because it's going to be an aid to our singing." If we allow that kind of reasoning, then the Scriptural pattern is meaningless.

As I thought about this, I realized that there is a difference between the aids we devise to serve God better and the additions that we might invent as a sneaky way of subverting his commandments. If something is an addition, it will stand on its own. If something is an aid, it won't. Let me give some examples. Anybody ever hear of a church that has devotional songleading on its own, in other words, some guy standing up there, calling out hymn numbers, and waving his arm around like he's swatting flies? Of course not! No church would do that. The songleader doesn't make sense unless he's leading the congregation in song. He's clearly an aid to the singing, not an addition to it. Similarly, anybody ever hear of devotional pitch-piping, where a dude comes up to the front, blows one note, waits a little bit, and blows an unrelated note? The notion is ridiculous. Blowing pitch only makes sense if you are doing it for the congregation as a worship aid.

On the other hand, do churches in the denominational world ever use instrumental music without singing for devotional purposes? You bet they do! I believe that just about every denominational funeral I've ever attended has included an instrumental version of "Take My Hand, Precious Lord." They can do that because instrumental music can stand on its own as a separate activity from singing. This is how we can tell that it is an addition, and not an aid.