

The Bulletin

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“Following Bible Examples”

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Much of what we know today of the New Testament order comes by way of examples pictured for us in the Bible. Whenever people have earnestly sought to duplicate New Testament Christianity in the current age, they have strongly and rightly emphasized the following Bible examples. The authority of Biblical examples lies in the fact that they are inspired accounts of the actual work of the apostles or of work done under their supervision. Thus an example has all the authority of a command.

Despite the significance of New Testament examples, a reckless and irresponsible use of them is disastrous. Every example in the Bible is not to be followed, nor are these examples to be followed in every detail. There is a need for people who claim to follow Bible examples to give careful study toward developing criteria by which relevant and authoritative examples may be easily distinguished from those irrelevant and lacking in authority. The purpose of this article is to suggest some possible guiding principles to be used in establishing ourselves firmly within the bounds of the ancient landmarks.



I. Distinction Must Be Made Between The Two Covenants.

Although God has made more than two covenants, yet the Bible speaks of the two major covenants as "the first" and "the second" (Hebrews 10:9). The first covenant was made by God with the Jewish "fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt" (Hebrews 8:9). This covenant is sometimes called the "law of Moses" or "the Old Testament."

Even before its end, prophets spoke of a new covenant. Jeremiah said: "*Behold the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*" (Hebrews 8:8; Jeremiah 31:31).

Furthermore, this new covenant was to be different from the other: "*Not according to the covenant I made with their fathers*" (Hebrews 8:9; Jeremiah 31:32). It is not our purpose at this time to detail the many points of difference between the two, but simply to state the patent fact that there are differences. Since this is true, it follows that no example in the first covenant is authoritative unless recommended in the second covenant or at least not inconsistent with the principles of the second covenant.

It is a most reckless practice to dart about anywhere throughout the Bible seeking examples without regard to the covenant in which they are found. In law, precedents cannot be cited from the legal system of another country; neither can examples from a former law be cited after that law has been superseded by another.

It is true that the old covenant affords examples illuminating certain moral principles which remain true under the new covenant. "*Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them*

committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples; and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (I Corinthians 10:6-11).

"See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused Him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from Him that speaketh from heaven" (Hebrews 12:25). "For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him" (Hebrews 2:2,3).

"Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience" (James 5:10).

"Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief" (Hebrews 4:11).

"Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7).

Thus, the first covenant affords examples warning against lust, idolatry, fornication, tempting Christ, murmuring, failing to hear God, examples of patience, and examples of God-sent punishment. These general principles remain true under the new covenant and the examples in the old covenant powerfully illustrate them for our learning.

The old covenant does not afford examples of the "new birth," of church worship, of church organization, or of conversion. Men in the old covenant did not undergo a "new birth," nor did they enjoy the "remission of sins"; they were not members of the church of Christ and knew nothing of such matters as church worship and organization. The nation of Israel worshipped, had its kings and priests, offered sacrifices, but these do not comprise examples to be followed today. Neither Abel's sacrifice, David's harp, nor the thief on the cross illustrate anything more than broad moral principles for us today; they do not tell us how to worship or how to receive remission of sins.

We are not even to duplicate everything Jesus did although he "*suffered for us, leaving us an example*" (I Peter 2:21). His sabbath keeping and temple worship belong to another covenant.

II. Distinction Must Be Made Between The Incidental And The Essential.

It is not enough that an example be taken from the New Covenant. Such examples must be refined still further by removing the merely incidental and retaining the essential.

By incidental, we mean "a chance or undesigned feature," hence a feature of secondary importance. By essential, we mean "necessary, indispensable, important in the highest degree." To illustrate the point: the apostles baptized people in Jerusalem. Is it essential in imitation of them to baptize in Jerusalem today? Is the place of baptizing an incidental or an essential? It should be clear that the incidental part of a Bible example is not binding in order faithfully to follow the example. An attempt to bind upon people something that is purely incidental results in fanaticism and hobbyism.

The problem to be solved is that of distinguishing between the incidental and the essential.

Some suggestions are here offered:

1. The incidental will vary from one example to the other; the essentials will remain unchanged. We must, then, seek for the constant factors in Bible examples.
2. The incidental will never be a part of a command. In the case of examples which are in obedience to commands, themselves also recorded in the Bible, a careful scrutiny of the command as compared to the example will enable one to sift the essential from the incidental.
3. If an act is symbolic, whatever things are necessary to the symbol are essentials. This does not mean that whatever is non-essential to the symbolism will therefore be an unnecessary part of the example.

Many questions may be satisfactorily solved by giving proper attention to incidentals as distinguished from essentials: Is running water essential to baptism? Is an upper room essential to the communion? Must two preachers go together in evangelistic work as did Paul and Barnabas? There is a New Testament example for each of these things mentioned, yet a fair examination of the record discloses these elements to be incidental.

III. Distinction Must Be Made Between Things Permanent And Temporary.

Some practices were engaged in during the first century which were not at all intended to be examples for our following today, simply because they were temporary rather than permanently binding. It would certainly be a mistake to attempt to retain in the church today practices which it was God's will should be discontinued. True respect for the Will of God certainly requires that we not only do the things now commanded of us, but also leave undone those things which He does not want us to do. Herewith are presented some principles to employ in determining whether a practice observed in the Bible was temporary of permanent.

1. Anything based solely upon custom is temporary.

The law of God is certainly not tied to the customs either of ancient civilizations or modern. Formerly, the washing of a traveler's feet was one way of extending hospitality. With changes in the customary mode of travel, hospitality is displayed in other ways. We are still to greet our brethren cordially, yet the formality of a "holy kiss" is not required because it was a temporary practice based on the then prevalent an customary way of saluting a brother.

2. Anything based upon temporary world conditions is temporary.

Under similar conditions, such would still be binding, yet we are not to feel bound to adhere to such a Bible example when world conditions change. We do not understand that some practices in the Jerusalem church were intended as permanent, viz. "*and all that believed were together, and had all things common*" (Acts 2:44) "*Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common*" (Acts 4:32).

Paul clearly conditioned his recommendations concerning marriage as being only for a certain time when he said: "*I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be*" (I Corinthians 7:26).

3. Anything involving the miraculous is temporary.

While miracles certainly were necessary in New Testament times to "*confirm the word*" (Mark 16:20) and miraculous gifts were needed "*for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:12), yet since "*that which is perfect is come*" (I Corinthians 13:10) any practices requiring miracles or miraculous gifts is clearly temporary.

4. Anything involving living apostles is temporary.

The apostles were necessary to the establishment and proper ordering of the church in the beginning, but the apostleship was a temporary office. In the very nature of the office and its requirements (Acts 1:21,22) there could be no successors. A "Jerusalem conference" today could settle no issue; even the attempt to do so would be anti-scriptural. An apostle would be needed to give his "sentence" (Acts 15:19). Thus, whatever examples or parts of examples were temporary are not to be followed today.

There is too much reckless handling of Bible examples. On the one hand, there is an alarming independence of them felt. Many seem to feel that everything in the Bible is temporary and incidental and that whenever they develop better ways (in their own eyes) of doing things, they are free to disdain Bible examples and substitute their own. Nadab and Abihu learned the folly of that, as did Ussah also. Leviticus 10:1,2; II Samuel 6:6,7.

We need to hearken to the admonition which God gave to Moses: "*See that thou make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount*" (Hebrews 8:5). "*And Moses verily was faithful in all his house.*" (Hebrews 3:5)

On the other hand, there is a blind following of examples which in its extreme nature rather detracts from, than adds to, their authority. It is such a blind following that reverts to Old Testament examples, binds the incidental, retains the temporary and burdens men with a yoke which they cannot carry.

May the Lord bless us that we may have proper respect for His Word, its sufficiency and its authority, and that rightly dividing it, we may be found conforming to the faith once for all delivered to the saints.