

The Worship Assembly

One of the main issues behind the disagreement of when and how the meeting of Christians is to be conducted is how we approach the interpretation of scripture. Without going into a lot of detail for the moment, I would like to suggest that the old tripartite formula of 1) command 2) approved example and 3) necessary inference may have been misapplied in the past. The formula itself is valid enough but needs some sharpening.

1. Command - Just because something is commanded in the New Testament doesn't necessarily mean we are to obey it. Now before you stone me for blasphemy, let me explain. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." Most of us would agree that the kiss was (and still is) an eastern style of greeting. In the West we generally use a handshake or a hug. In fact, a kiss might seem out of place at best and show a hint of impropriety at worst. So what do we do with this command? We say it is the principle of greeting one another in a holy manner that is emphasized and not the kiss itself. By so doing, we are not obeying the literal command to kiss. We are obeying the underlying principle that we believe was intended by the command and have translated that principle into a culturally relevant and acceptable substitute. The point is that some commands are to be obeyed literally and some are not. How do we know which are and which aren't? Good question. We'll get to that a little later on.
2. Approved example - Just because the Christians in the first century did something a certain way doesn't mean that all Christians in all cultures in all times are required to do it the same exact way. We have often confused the goal of restoration by thinking that we need to restore the first century church. That is not the goal. The goal is to restore/practice NEW TESTAMENT Christianity, not FIRST CENTURY Christianity. There is a difference. It has to do with applying the intended principle and not just rotely plugging in a cultural form/practice. Lydia and the girls met down by the river for "church." Does that mean that we are all to meet at the river? The earliest Christians met in the temple for church. Should we be seeking out the local Jewish synagogue/temple to rent? The earliest Christians also met in homes. Does that mean it is REQUIRED that we all meet in homes? Of course not. We understand that is just what they did because it was expedient and did not go against any Christian principle. Are we sinning by meeting in church buildings since there is no command to do so and no example of the early Christians doing so? Of course not. Unfortunately, we have often acted like a bunch of lawyers fighting over a legal document rather than children of God searching for the real message of God. The New Testament is not a legal document. We often focus on form and ritual rather than the message/principle that God wants us to get. Sound familiar? Does the word "Pharisee" ring a bell?
3. Necessary inference - Well, who decides whether the inference is necessary or not? Necessary inference has been used to justify all kinds of ungodly division and church splits.

Now, don't get me wrong. I believe command, example and inference are all valid. I just believe it goes a little deeper than that. Was the command intended for all cultures at all

times? Or are we reading a command that was intended for specific people in a specific place at a specific time. Context is the key! We have often accused our religious neighbors of taking verses out of context but we have been guilty of doing exactly the same thing.

Church buildings are not explicitly commanded and there is no example of them. They are simply a practical way of making it possible to practice the principle of getting together to encourage one another, etc. It's the principle that is important and there is nothing in scripture that I know of that says the structure of the meeting place is important.

Weekly contribution is often validated by misusing 1 Cor. 16:1,2. The contribution mentioned in the verses was a special contribution for famine relief. There is no actual scripture commanding weekly contribution or limiting contributions to Sunday only. The example you see in Acts is that Christians gave daily as there was need. The point was not the form, day or time of the contribution - the point was to make sure no one was in need!

What about located preachers and Sunday school classes? Nothing specific can be found regarding the form. It's not the form, it's the principle. People need to be taught the word of God - whether by located preacher, Sunday school, VBS or internet. Teaching took place in a variety of contexts, methods and manners in the NT. I guess you could call Paul a located preacher while he continued to preach while imprisoned in Rome!

Praise teams are found in the Old Testament but not in the NT. The principle is to praise and worship God. A form should not necessarily be eliminated just because it is not explicitly repeated in the NT. The question is does it violate any principle of God. A single song leader isn't mentioned in the NT and neither are multiple song leaders. Who decided a single song leader is acceptable and multiple song leaders are not?

Shall we use one cup or multiple cups for the Lord's Supper? Well, shall we meet in a church building or in an upper room of a private residence? It's amazing that we have enough sense to know that the upper room is insignificant but not enough sense to know that number of cups is also not the point. Personally, I think the one loaf and the one cup would be good because it emphasizes the oneness (unity) of the church. Paul actually talks about this in Corinthians. But is one cup and one loaf the only acceptable way to participate in the Lord's Supper? There is no command for it. And what about taking the Lord's Supper in the context of a full on meal? Do we do that? The apostles and Jesus did.

What about meeting on Sunday? Sunday obviously holds significance as the day of resurrection but the early Christians often met daily.

There is no magic in performing precise rituals. There is something more Catholic than Christian, more Pharisee than faith, in our over-emphasis on form to the detriment of principle.