

Interpretation deals with what scripture teaches about doctrinal matters to be believed. It deals with what scripture teaches about practices to be done. Within “praxis” lies a further distinction between example and precedent—between what was done and what was meant to be done by other people thereafter. Establishing precedent has two steps: (1) showing that such and such was, in fact, a New Testament pattern; and (2) showing that the pattern was meant to apply universally and permanently.

### 1. Distinguishing the types of things

#### a. Precedent *vs.* example

“Precedent” has more than one meaning. Saying there is precedent for handling a matter in some way could mean that it may still be handled that way (as one possibility). In this study, however, precedent means the way a matter was intended to be handled. Precedent in this sense becomes case law (as opposed to statutory law) like the tradition of the elders in Judaism (as opposed to the Mosaic Law itself).

Hermeneutics deals with doctrinal affirmation of scripture about the nature of things, the purpose of God, the pattern of authentic human life. Precedent adds the task of attaching significance to apostolic practice as recorded in the New Testament. Commandment and precedent both represent God’s intentions for the body of Christ. “Precedent” combines with “example” as two ways of viewing today’s meaning for the apostles’ ways of doing things. The former term takes their actions simply as examples of how they operated in the first-century world; the latter adds the conviction that those procedures established norms for subsequent Christian practice. Adherents of the faith need principles for distinguishing one from the other.

At issue here is a significant concern for the modern church because it affects the status of culture and the use of functional equivalents. It likewise bears on Christian unity because Christians may vary in how they perceive the significance of New Testament practice. There is significant correlation between the precedent-example and gospel-culture distinctions.

The precedent-example issue impacts cross-cultural witness. What are Christians free to do with New Testament practices that are counter-cultural today? What of one-cup communion in a society that is hypersensitive to germs or feetwashing in a culture that ridicules “smelly feet”? What about immersion in places with little water, or communion where grapes do not grow? Do missionaries substitute functional equivalents, or do they suspend action till it can be done “the way God wants it done”? If they do not clearly understand what constitutes Christianity, they may find themselves culturalizing rather than Christianizing, or syncretizing rather than Christianizing by overdoing functional equivalency.

The issue is primarily a matter of hermeneutics because it is primarily a matter of authority. Precedent for subsequent generations amounts to the same thing as the cross-cultural transmission of gospel forms, because many questions about precedent have to do with formal, ritual, symbolic acts. An evangelist needs to transmit a form to the receiving culture—especially if difficulties are involved—rests on the intent behind the New

Testament examples of form and more basically who the intending persons were. God's spokesmen cannot override divine authority for anything doctrinal or behavioral; so they must decide what to do.

Because of unity concerns, Christians raise warnings about trying to build doctrines on narratives. Without accompanying explanations, the interpreter cannot always tell from what happened what the reasons were for what happened. For these reasons, explanatory materials need to take precedence over unexplained narrative in building any viewpoint from scripture (See *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, p. 302.)

Primitivism—or restorationism, as it is also called—has drawn heavily on the concept of apostolic precedent. Some have taken it to the point of becoming formulaic and patternistic, as if everything can and must follow those exact patterns or desired results are not forthcoming. Primitivism may get rid of some excesses of tradition by using precedent as a restrictive tool; but it does not provide a trustworthy guide because it can bring in an apparently irrelevant restriction. The positive approach calls for knowing where to stop in deciding what New Testament examples would have been meant as precedents. Otherwise, to do anything as a church would require justification for doing it. The presence of example does not necessarily require (precedent), and the absence of example does not necessarily prohibit. There has to be more to the solution of the problem; so the following considerations come into the process.

#### b. Apostolic precedent *vs.* church tradition

The discussion about precedent deals with “approved precedent” in contrast to church tradition. The conviction in primitivism has been that only biblical teaching and apostolic precedent can have any authority in the church. Even in Protestantism, however, there has been the belief that tradition has value for interpretation. Primitivism has not granted priority to ancient interpretation despite the common idea that temporal proximity to the apostles gave the early fathers extra-biblical access to their teaching and practice. Justified skepticism here arises from the fact that even before the apostles had passed off the scene—indeed from the very beginning of the church, foreign teaching and practices were being promoted by Jewish and pagan converts as well as by outsiders who sought to syncretize the Christian movement with Greek philosophy. The legal bent in Jewish backgrounds and the hypostatic presuppositions in Greek philosophy combined early on to pervert the interpersonal message of Christianity with wooden ideas issuing from tasteless interpretation and clumsy theologizing—and that from among the most prominent persons in the early church.

#### 2. Examples of issues involved

a. Church organization. Some communions consider the local and universal structure of the church as belonging among the adiaphora, the “indifferent things.” Others consider structure a matter of commandment and precedent but disagree on what that structure should be.

(1) Some Christians believe there can be *no added offices* even below the level of deacon, that is, at the bottom of the “flow chart.”

- (2) May individuals come together to establish *parachurch agencies*, or must these efforts be organized under the eldership of a local congregation?
- (3) Must all Christian efforts be financed through the *treasury of a local church*?
- (4) Is *local autonomy* the norm or something with certain advantages?
- (5) May *Sunday schools* be used together with Sunday school literature?
- (6) Is it appropriate to have a *paid ministry*?
- (7) Is *multiple eldership* required?

**b. Church-state relations**

- (1) May Christians own *private property* or should they practice communism?
- (2) May congregations own *church property* or should they use private facilities for their activities?
- (3) Is it possible to have unity of *church and state*?

**c. Christian ritual**

**(1) The Lord's Supper**

(a) Form: do worshippers use one loaf and one cup, one loaf but individual cups? Is the liquid element supposed to be observed from a container with a handle, because the biblical text talks about a “cup.” Is observance part of a communal meal like the ancient agape feast, or love feast? Are two prayers necessary, one for each emblem? Do communicants observe each emblem immediately after each prayer for that emblem? Can the elements be observed together (intinction)? Is observing one enough since blood is in flesh?

(b) Frequency: is the Lord's Supper observed daily, weekly, annually, only on Sunday? Could it be taken more than once on Sunday because people may be involved in more than one worship service?

(c) Elements: must communicants use unleavened bread and unfermented grape juice, or are yeasted bread and fermented wine also acceptable?

(d) Sequence: do the loaf and cup need to be taken in that order or could they be reversed?

(e) Kinds: do worshipers need to take communion in “both kinds,” or is it legitimate to follow the practice of giving only the wafer to the laity?

(f) Time: does the Supper need to be observed after dark on the analogy of its time of institution?

(g) Place: does the Supper need to be observed in an upper room?

**(2) Baptism**

(a) Form

immersion vs. any act administered with water

single-action baptism vs. triune action

(b) Administrator?

Able to be self-administered (like Jewish washings)

Administered only by official (ordained) clergy

Official administrator nor required

(c) Candidates

Paedobaptism

Only after the age of accountability?

Rebaptism situations

(d) Formula: Jesus-only Baptists pit an example of what the text says

the early church did in Acts, against the discourse material in Matthew 28:18-20.

(e) The connection between baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit is often dissolved by evangelicals because of the accounts in the Book of Acts. Cornelius received the gift directly from heaven before baptism; the twelve in Ephesus received the Spirit in connection with the laying on of hands after baptism; Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism. Besides not distinguishing the difference between Johannine and Christian baptisms, between the interpersonal gift of the Spirit and supernatural endowment from the Spirit, the method of interpretation bases a conclusion about the logical relationship on chronological sequence.

(3) Healing: Is there a special form of observance that must be followed for the promise to be fulfilled (James 5:13-15)? Is anointing with olive oil a necessary part of the procedure?

(4) Worship

(a) The wearing of a veil

(b) The use of instrumental music

(c) The use of “songs of human composure”

(d) The use of church buildings

(e) The use of choirs and singing in harmony

(f) The possibility of praying to the Holy Spirit

(g) The raising of hands (1 Timothy 2:8; cp. Psalm 134:2; 141:2)

(h) Worship on other than Sunday as the primary day of worship

(See elsewhere “Worship on Sunday.“)

(5) Ordination (Acts 13:13)

(a) Whether to practice ordination if supernatural gifts are not being transferred

(b) Prayer and fasting as part of the ordination process

(6) Men-women relations

(a) Women teaching men in the church

(b) Hierarchical or egalitarian marriage

(7) Private property (Luke 18:18-23; Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 5:1-11)

## (8) Footwashing (John 13:1-20)

Footwashing (perhaps as part of fourfold communion): Can the marks of the New Testament phenomenon raise footwashing above the level of example? (See elsewhere “A Format for Thinking About Footwashing.”)

## (9) Miscellaneous

- (a) Wearing braided hair
- (b) Wearing jewelry
- (c) Salutation with a holy kiss
- (d) Holding up the hands in prayer and worship
- (e) Eating blood, or things strangled (Acts 15:19-21)
- (f) The modern practice of dating
- (g) Men wearing “long” hair and women wearing “short” hair
- (h) Suicide (Saul and others in the Old Testament)
- (i) Polygamy (Abraham, Jacob, Samuel’s parents)

## (10) Churches organizing together and owning property jointly

## 3. Principles for distinguishing precedent and example

a. Sufficient examples to establish a pattern and show some geographical and cross-cultural distribution

b. Uniform examples

c. Presence of accompanying propositions that explain the reasons for the practice. Is the example limited or universalized by anything in the context, as for example the matter of not marrying or remarrying “*on account of the present distress*” (1 Corinthians 7:26)? The precedent issue can be mixed with teaching materials.

d. Consistency in the argument pattern; by parity of reason can the argument pattern be used on other issues as well? If the same pattern of reasoning can yield obviously false results on other topics, there is something wrong with it on this topic. What “proves too much” does not prove what it seems to prove (*What the Bible Says About Salvation*, p. 401, ¶ 1-2).

e. Nature of the case; can the principle involved be expressed in other ways, or is it tied to the form in a one-for-one fashion either by uniformity of example or clear positive commandment?

f. Persons giving the examples; is this practice also carried out by non-religious people outside the church? If so, it is a cultural thing: the holy kiss (1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12), footwashing (Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21; 1 Samuel 25:41; 2 Samuel 11:8; John 13:5-12; ?1 Timothy 5:10 + Hebrews 13:2), anointing with oil (Ruth 3:3; Luke 4:3-50; cp. Psalm 23:5; Matthew 6:17; cp. 2 Samuel 12:20; 14:2). Approved precedent is apostolic precedent.

g. Dispensational distinctions

h. Cultural practice outside the church

i. Motives for seeking an alternative to the New Testament practice

#### 4. Application of principles to selected issues

##### a. The instrument question

Non-instrument hermeneutics regarding behavior/practice derives from commandment, precedent, necessary inference. Certain issues should be considered in each case. In commandment, readers must discern (1) whether the imperatives of the text are addressed to them (dispensational distinctions, special cases, *etc.*) and (2) whether they are cases of commandment or advice. In precedent, the issues are (1) whether the action was intended to set a precedent or was simply an example and (2) whether it has the marks that a precedent needs to have. In necessary inference, the questions are (1) whether people are properly inferring and (2) whether the accompanying presuppositions they bring to the issue are correct.

(1) Uniformity, distribution, and amount of example do not apply, because there is no example one way or the other. Old Testament examples are disallowed because of the distinction between covenants. References in Revelation are dismissed because they are in figurative eschatological contexts. Examples in non-church settings are set aside because they do not relate to worship.

(2) The nature of the case does not help, because musical instruments are not evil in themselves, or they could not have been allowed in Old Testament worship. The idea that silence equals prohibition could not be applied to life as a whole; hence, by some principle it must be limited demonstrably to worship so that the principle becomes “silence in matters of worship equals prohibition.” A distinction applies here between *acts of worship* and *aids to worship*. Accompanying singing with an instrument or setting the mood of a service with instrumental music is not the same thing as worshiping God with an instrument.

(3) Accompanying propositions could conceivably prove useful, because God might decide for reasons adequate to himself that he prefers a particular set of ways for being worshiped.

(a) Hebrews 7:14 has been used for this purpose. Silence in the law regarding anyone from Judah serving as priest prohibited anyone from Judah serving in this role in Mosaism. The problem, however, is that who can legitimately serve as priest is an organizational matter, not a matter of worship; it is a qualification for an office, not a description of worship. Priests led in worship, but who could be priest is a different question from what priests should do. It is agreed that under law, silence is prohibition relative to organizational structure; it is not agreed that silence on non-legal things in general is prohibition.

(b) Arguments from analogy are used, including the fact that Cain's sacrifice was not acceptable whereas Abel's was. The supposition is that Cain offered from the produce of the land rather than from the offspring of the herd, and God had not commanded produce to be used as an offering. The Old Testament does not say, however, that such was the reason God did not accept it. Hebrews 11:4 simply puts the reason in the lack of Cain's faith.

(4) Consistency of the argument pattern becomes difficult since silence as prohibition cannot apply to the whole of life and no passage establishes it within the limited area of worship. It may be observed, however, that in the Old Testament the Law of Moses did not provide for instrumental music; yet David brought it into the temple worship if in fact it did not appear with the tabernacle worship before. If silence prohibits in matters of worship, then he would have sinned in introducing it.

Much of the impetus for the non-instrument worship came originally in part of the Reformation as a reaction to perceived excesses in medieval worship, particularly from John Calvin. That raises the question of how such practices can be eliminated if not because silence as prohibition. The answer comes is that certain promises are associated with some of those practices that are unacceptable; God has not promised the blessings the clergy promises in connection with them. But more to the point is that the church is an interpersonal system, and its worship is interpersonal; so formalism and ritual are not germane to it or its operations and detract from the purposes for which people assemble before God.

#### b. Church organization

(1) The amount, consistency, and distribution of the examples are rather clear, especially in regard to eldership:

- (a) Jerusalem: Acts **11:30; 15:5**
- (b) Philippi: Philippians **1:1**
- (c) Galatia and Syria: Acts **14:23**
- (d) Ephesus: Acts **20:17, 28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2-5;**  
1 Timothy **3:1ff.**, and so on
- (e) Crete: Titus **1:5ff.**
- (f) Northern Asia Minor: 1 Peter **5:1ff.** (James **5:14?**)

(2) The nature of the case is that a specified organization is necessarily exclusive of all other parallel possibilities. In organizational matters, injunction is restriction. Any additions at the top or in the middle would reshuffle the responsibilities of the offices provided for, from lordship all the way down through the diaconate.

(3) Accompanying propositions show that apostles, prophets, pastor-teacher-elder-bishops are of *divine origin* (1 Corinthians **12:28**; Ephesians **4:11**; cp. Acts **20:17, 28; 14:23**). Christ received these gifts and gave them to men; the Holy Spirit made the Ephesian elders responsible for their charges; Christ personally chose the apostles. The *intended permanence* of the offices can be seen individually in reference to the Lord (1 Corinthians **15:24ff.**), the apostles (Luke **22:30**; Revelation **21:14**), and elders (Acts **20:28-30; 1 Timothy 3-4; Titus 1:9-2:13**). Furthermore, there is no amendment clause.

These observations, however, still leave unaddressed whether the pattern we might discern was intended to be that way in an exclusive sense.

#### c. Anointing with oil for physical healing

Some religious groups practice what they call faith healing and include a rather formulaic approach to what makes the healing “work.” The procedure must be followed precisely, or the promise is not necessarily effective. Since anointing with oil does not have a place in Western non-religious culture, Western Christians do not even think about it when they approach the Lord for healing. Faith healers, then, characteristically tie the lack of healing to not following the correct pattern of calling the elders (plural), laying on hands, praying, and this matter of anointing with olive oil. James 5:14-15 provides the central text for this view of healing.

(1) Uses of oil in the New Testament

- (a) As an indication of the end of mourning: Matthew 6:17 (cp. 2 Samuel 12:20; 14:2)
- (b) In preparations for burial: Mark 16:1; compare 14:8 = John 12:3-8 + 11:2?
- (c) As a cosmetic: Luke 4:3-50 (cp. Psalm 23:5); Ruth 3:3; Luke 7:38 + 4b; compare Mark 14:8 = John 12:3-8 + 11:2?
- (d) As a sign of divine appointment: Luke 4:18; Acts 4:27; 10:38; 2 Corinthians 1:21; Hebrews 1:9
- (e) In connection with healing: Mark 6:13 (miraculous); James 5:14 (non-miraculous); compare Revelation 3:18; Luke 10:34

(2) Observations on James 5:14

(a) James 5:14 evidently does not refer to miraculous healing: “*the prayer of faith will save the sick*” (5:15). It appears in a context about the effectiveness of prayer.

(b) This situation presupposes all the conditions normally attending prayer: that it is in accordance with God’s will, that the request is made in faith, that God does not consider his grace already sufficient for the person in need (2 Corinthians 12:9). In conclusion, the particulars of the James 5 text are no stronger than the general promise that whatever believers ask in Christ’s name believing they will receive (Matthew 21:22, etc.).

(3) Observations on faith healing

Only two cases appear where anointing with oil accompanies healing—Mark 6:13 and James 5:14. There is lack of uniformity in the examples: in all the other cases of miraculous or answered-prayer healing, no mention is made of anointing with olive oil. The kind of thing it is can vary without contradiction. A non-germane cultural pattern does not have to be maintained by the church in other cultures; olive trees do not even grow in some parts of the world. Other explanations could be given for the use of oil in the text of James 5: it may be a way of showing the expectancy of answered prayer by preparing the person to “meet the public” or resume daily tasks (Matthew 6:17); it could be a non-essential symbol of the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27).

d. The use of church buildings

There is a lack of uniformity in the use of meeting facilities by the early New Testament church. They met in the temple (Acts 2:46), in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10), and in homes. There are no examples of church buildings. There are no accompanying prohibitions; the nature of the case is such that variation can occur. As a result, the matter falls under expediency and preference. The only question may be the advisability of wrapping up so many resources in property and buildings.

e. Private property

There is clearly a lack of uniformity in the examples. While many Jerusalem Christians sold their possessions and brought the money to the apostles, not everyone did. Acts 12:12 mentions the house of Mary the mother of John Mark, which served as a meeting place for early Christians. The same applies to Lydia (Acts 16:15) and all the cases of house churches. The houses belonged to someone who could speak for their use.

The right to private property goes all the way back to the situation assumed in the eighth commandment "*Do not steal.*"

f. Exorcism

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