

Restoration: In Practice

PART 4

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
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It is good to see all of you on this, the first Sunday of a new year! If you are visiting with us today (either here in person or online), we are glad to have you with us this morning, and we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the front of the bulletin or by going to our website at fourlakescoc.org/visitor.

We are here today to praise and to thank God for saving us, but we are also here to share the good news that God loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die in our place. We respond to the good news by obeying it – we turn away from sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as being the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. And we do have several examples today, starting with an update from Mark Posey, who preaches in Alabama as well as in Ukraine. He says, “Praise God! 6 baptisms in Ukraine today (December 25, 2022)!” So this happened last Sunday, apparently, and that is all we know, but what a blessing!

This next one comes to us from Alexandr Rodichev, who also preaches in Ukraine. He posted about a week ago as well and simply says, “Wow! 6 new sisters in Christ.” In spite of some challenging circumstances, to say the least, great things are still happening, and we praise God for that.

This next one comes to us from the church in Sorrento, Florida (last weekend). They say,

The angels are rejoicing this morning and so are we, that Nick Peters made the decision to be baptized for the remission of his sins, even in freezing cold water! Nick read Muscle and a Shovel and then sat down and studied the Back to the Bible books with us. Congratulations Nick, we are so happy to have you as a new brother in Christ!

Now, I’m not sure whether people in Florida actually know what “freezing cold water” feels like, but I will say this is the first baptism I can remember where the one doing the baptizing is wearing a hat. But we are thankful for Nick’s decision this week, to brave the frigid water in an outdoor pool down in Florida.

This next one comes to us from Evan, who preaches among the people of the Navajo Nation near Gallup, New Mexico. Evan says that “God has added another soul to the body of His son. Please keep Patrick Lake in your prayers. God is good.” We are thankful for Evan and the good work he is doing.

This next one comes to us from the Lord's church in Bedford, Texas. They say, "We have a new sister in Christ – Marylin, Amen! Baptized this past Sunday December 25th after our morning worship!" I know we've had several, but I had to share this one, because we have someone wearing a Grinch shirt baptized on Christmas. Awesome!

And this last one comes to us from the Central congregation in Haines City, Florida. They say, "What a great way to end 2022 – with a Baptism. Ashton came forward tonight and was baptized into Christ by Rusty. The five elders gathered around Ashton and prayed for a 'Hedge of Protection' as he begins his walk with Christ. [We are rejoicing with]...the angels in Heaven." If we can help with your obedience to the good news, please let us know.

This morning, we are concluding our brief series of lessons where we are looking at a good question that came from one of our young adults who wants to know: How do we as Christians answer this question a friend asked me, "How do you know that your version of Christianity is the right one?" It's a great question, and we started several weeks ago by suggesting a possible "short answer," and that is: By taking the Bible as our only authority, we are doing the best we can to restore simple, New Testament Christianity. That's the short answer. We're not really defending "our version of Christianity" as the right one, but we are trying to communicate that our goal is to honor scripture and to use the word of God as a pattern as we try to restore simple, New Testament Christianity.

To elaborate on the short answer, we started by looking at the CONCEPT of restoration by thinking back to what happened back in the time of King Josiah (in 2 Kings 22). Josiah takes over as king at only 8 years old, the people have left God completely, but Josiah's heart is devoted to pleasing God. As they clean out the temple, they find God's law. We learned, then, that God's Law can be both lost and found. And when he found it, Josiah kept investigating.

We then moved into 2 Kings 23 and noted what is basically a case study in restoration. After finding it, King Josiah starts with a commitment to follow God's law no matter what, he destroys everything that is not allowed or authorized under the Law, he re-institutes what God had commanded (in this case, the Passover), and he does this, even though he knows that his efforts will probably not be appreciated by the next generation. He persists.

And last week, we moved into the New Testament as we looked at several passages warning about the danger of ignoring or changing the divine message, and we closed by noting the restoration ideal: Even though the religious world is terribly divided these days, we noted that the remedy is to think of God's word as both a pattern and a seed. We don't necessarily need some kind of unbroken succession all the way back to the beginning, but if we have the seed, we can grow today what they had back then.

This morning, I'd like for us to conclude this brief series of lessons by taking a few moments to look at the restoration concept IN PRACTICE. In other words, what does a restored church look like? And can we find it today? What are we looking for? If someone could take the seed of God's word and plant it in honest hearts, and if these people were to obey the word and come together as a congregation, what would that congregation look like? Well, like we did last week, instead of using just one passage, we will be looking at several this morning.

But as we think about the Lord's church and what it would look like if we could restore it today, I want us to note some qualities, some characteristics. And the list I'm giving today is in no way comprehensive. I'm just doing the best I can to try to give a brief overview and to share some of what I've learned through the years and what I've noticed as being important.

- I. **So, as we get into this, it certainly seems to me (once we've taken the Bible as our guide) that God's church needs to be a place where his people LOVE EACH OTHER.**

And we start here, because in John 13, Jesus specifically identifies "*love*" as a characteristic that will be used by the world to identify God's people. This first passage comes from John 13:34-35, where Jesus, on the night before he dies, says, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one*

another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." I hope you understand why we start with this one! We're talking about characteristics of a restored church, and Jesus himself says: This is it! Love! And we've studied this before, so we won't dwell on this, but the love Jesus mentions here is not a feeling; no, this kind of love involves actually doing what is best for somebody – seeing a need and filling it. In context (at the beginning of John 13), Jesus has just washed the apostles' feet. Why? Because they were dirty! Not to establish some new religious ritual. So also today, love means doing whatever needs to be done – preparing food, helping somebody out with rent, shoveling a driveway, driving somebody to a doctor appointment – any number of things. As God's people, we take care of each other. We do things for each other. And if we are not, then we are missing something, because Jesus says that love is how everybody will know that we are his disciples.

II. Beyond love itself, if we're trying to identify a group that's looking to restore simple New Testament Christianity, I would suggest looking very carefully at what they teach about GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION.

In fact, I would just ask, *"What must I do to be saved?"* And if their answer doesn't match the answer that was given to that exact question in scripture, then I would encourage you to move on and keep looking. I know we give a summary of God's plan every Lord's Day morning, and we do this because it is important. We do this because we are virtually alone in the religious world today in explaining it in this way. We must hear and understand God's message (this means we must be old enough to understand). To us, this may be obvious, but we have millions in the religious world who teach that you don't have to hear and understand; but, this comes first. We must then respond to the message of salvation by believing it. We respond with faith that what God has said in his word is true and that he has the power to deliver. We must then repent of sin; we must turn away from it; we have a change of heart and mind that results in a change in the way we are living. We then confess with the mouth that Jesus is truly the Christ, the Son of God. We make a public statement. And at that point, we are ready for baptism, an immersion in water where we are buried with Christ for the forgiveness of sins; we are baptized into his death. We have all of the references up here.

And I would just briefly note that the order matters. I'll share an example from Mark 16:16, where Jesus says, *"He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."* Unfortunately, many in the religious world have seriously twisted the purpose of baptism by rearranging the order of this very simple statement. The Lord says, *"He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved."* Many, though, have basically rearranged this statement to say, "He who has been baptized shall be saved and may someday believe." I'm referring to those who practice infant baptism (something never found in the New Testament, but added by groups like the Catholic Church and the various Lutheran churches). They teach that babies must be baptized to be saved, but they have moved belief from being something that happens BEFORE baptism to something that happens 12 or 13 years AFTER baptism. Jesus, though, teaches that belief comes first. The other very popular change to what Jesus has said here is, "He who has believed shall be saved and then be baptized." This is taught by most Baptist churches and by many others in the Evangelical world. The idea is: You believe in Jesus (perhaps demonstrated by asking Jesus to come into your heart), you are saved at this point, and then they suggest that you be baptized merely to identify yourself with the church. Baptism and salvation, therefore, are in the wrong order, "He who has believed shall be saved and then be baptized." But that is not what Jesus actually says in Mark 16:16.

Peter, in fact, will tell the people on Pentecost (in Acts 2:38), *"Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* We must be baptized, not just as an outward sign of something that has already happened, but we must be baptized *"for the forgiveness of sins."* As Peter will go on to say in 1 Peter 3:21, *"baptism now saves you."* Our understanding of baptism at the time we are baptized is very important. Even the last step up here is

important, the idea that we must “live for Jesus.” Many teach that once you’ve been saved, there is nothing you could possibly do to ever be lost. That’s not true. To be saved, we must continue living for the Lord.

If we had time, we could go on to talk about how so many groups have substituted sprinkling or pouring instead of immersion. The Bible, though, describes baptism as being “*buried*” (Colossians 2:12 and Romans 6:4), describing people going “*down into the water*” and coming “*up out of the water*” (Acts 8:38-39), and so on. And when we go looking for a church, and when we compare everything that is taught with actual scripture, there are very, very few who get this right. This is not a buffet where we get to choose, but all of this is important.

III. We’ve looked at LOVE, we’ve looked at the PLAN OF SALVATION, but I would also suggest that how a church is ORGANIZED AND GOVERNED is also very important.

How is the church structured? How do they make decisions? When we read the New Testament, we find that each congregation is completely autonomous, meaning “self-governing.” The early church had no organizational structure beyond the local congregation – no popes or cardinals, no earthly headquarters, no regional conferences with men voting on what would be taught. Instead, each congregation was responsible for selecting its own elders, men who would oversee and shepherd the congregation. Last week, we talked about Paul calling for the “*elders*” of the church in Ephesus to meet him on the beach in Miletus (in Acts 20). When these men showed up, he told them to “*shepherd*” the church of God, among which the Holy Spirit had made these men “*overseers*.” These are the three words used to describe the leaders of local congregations – elders, overseers, and shepherds – and these three words are used interchangeably in scripture, describing various aspects of the work these men are called to do. The Bible knows nothing about the one-man “pastor system,” where one guy is responsible for leading the congregation on his own. Instead, a plurality of men must meet a number of qualifications (outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5), and these men are then appointed by the church to oversee the congregation. They are then assisted in their work by faithful men serving as deacons (with those qualifications also given in scripture). And in terms of hierarchy or organization, this is it. Very simple! I’m just saying that when we plant the seed of God’s word, this is what sprouts, not the monstrosity of bureaucracy that we see in the religious world all around us.

IV. I know there is so much more we could think about this morning in terms of restoring simple, New Testament Christianity (the name or description of the church, the titles we wear, when the church was established, and so on), but before we bring this series to an end, we do need to at least mention the WORSHIP of the church.

How do we worship God? What do we actually do when we get together? The word we have translated as “worship” in the New Testament often goes back to a word meaning “to kiss toward,” and it’s the idea of bowing down and perhaps kissing the hand of a king, as a sign of reverence or respect. That’s what worship is: Showing our respect for God. We worship, then, on his terms, not ours. Our goal, to the best of our ability, is to offer to God not necessarily what we want, but what he wants, what he has asked for in his word. And in terms of honoring God, we express this in several ways:

We come together to LISTEN TO HIS WORD. We pay attention to what he has said, and we recommit our lives to obeying it. Obviously, we need to be reading and studying on our own (we have a good Bible reading plan in the cubbyholes this morning and also linked in the bulletin), but there is a special value in coming together and in doing this as a group.

We also honor God through **PRAYER**. We come to God as a congregation – expressing our love and adoration in prayer, asking for his help, thanking him for our many blessings. And as was the custom of the early church, if we agree with the prayer that is offered, we have the great privilege in being able to say “AMEN,” indicating (as we taught our children when they were little) that “your prayer is my prayer, too.” Some have suggested that the word “AMEN” means “so be it.” To borrow a phrase from Captain Picard, “Make it so” The “AMEN” is how we pray together. I do think we could do a better job restoring this ancient practice here at this congregation. If you agree with what has been said in a prayer, say “AMEN!” But prayer is an act of worship.

We also honor God by **GIVING**. The New Testament never commands tithing, we don’t send you a bill (as some churches do), we don’t have garage sales or beer gardens to raise money (as some churches do), but we as God’s people are simply to give *“as we have been prospered,”* and we give willingly and cheerfully, for *“God loves a cheerful giver.”* And we do this on the first day of every week (according to 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). What if you get paid once a month, or every two weeks, or once a year? You guys know I am not good with numbers, but I do have a calculator on my phone, and I would be glad to help you with this. We divide it out so that we give on the first day of every week.

We also honor God by partaking of **THE LORD’S SUPPER** – not just once a quarter, not just once a year, not just on Christmas and Easter or at weddings and funerals, but (like giving) on the first day of every week. It’s always amazing to me that a religious group that can’t figure out that the Lord’s Supper is to happen every Lord’s Day somehow figures out that giving is to happen every Lord’s Day. The Lord’s Supper was instituted by Jesus on the night before he died. It involves unleavened bread (representing his body) and the fruit of the vine (representing his blood that was poured out for the forgiveness of our sins – the same phrase, by the way, that refers to baptism – just as his blood was shed for the forgiveness of sins, so also we are to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins).

And then we also honor God by **SINGING** – together, all of us participating! We are not performing, we don’t come here to watch a show or listen to a choir or a praise team or a band, but we are singing (primarily) for an audience of One. We sing to God. But there is a sense in which we sing and admonish “one another.” We do this without the use of instruments. Wouldn’t it sound better? Maybe. But it’s not really about us, is it? We are here to worship, and God has asked that we sing. So, we sing, and we leave it at that.

And this is worship in a nutshell – simple, New Testament Christianity – we can do this in a cave somewhere, or we can do this with thousands of people, but worship itself is simple and reverent, and our aim is to honor God. Years ago, I ran across something written by a man known as Justin Martyr. Justin was born in Samaria in the early 100’s AD. He first studied the teachings of Socrates and Plato, but around 133 AD he converted to Christianity. His writings are some of the earliest we have outside the Bible itself. He was beheaded around 165 AD, and that is why we now know him as Justin “Martyr.” In his writings, he tells us what worship was like in the First Century. Before we close our thoughts on restoring worship this morning, I would invite you listen carefully to what our brothers and sisters were doing in roughly 150 AD. This is how he describes it:

...on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the [one who presides over the service] verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine...are brought, and the [one who presides] in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people [agree], saying “Amen”; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that

over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected...takes care of all who are in need.

Does this sound familiar? I see it every single week here at this congregation. Our goal is to faithfully restore simple, New Testament Christianity.

Conclusion:

This morning, in answering the question, “How do you know that your version of Christianity is the right one?” we’ve looked at some characteristics of the Lord’s church, some things we would expect to find if the seed of God’s word were to sprout and grow today. One thing I found interesting about our study today (and about this concept in general): If we compare what we believe to what we see in the religious world around us, there is very little that is unique to us. Characteristic by characteristic, item by item, we are generally not alone.

For example:

- We are not the only ones who believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God.
- We are not the only ones who get together on the first day of every week for worship.
- We are not the only ones who believe that Jesus is the Son of God.
- We are not the only ones who teach that baptism is necessary for salvation.
- We are not the only ones who believe that baptism is an immersion in water.
- We are not the only ones who sing without instruments.
- We are not the only ones who partake of the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week.
- We are not the only ones who love each other.

And yet, as I think about these things, I realize that we are very much alone when it comes to believing ALL of these things. Others may take several or even most, but we believe that everything is important. And that’s our invitation: Join us as we do the best we can to restore simple, New Testament Christianity. If we are missing something, if we are failing in some way, we may need your help to figure it out, and we invite that. Our goal (in all humility) is to use God’s word as a pattern, as a seed, as we go back and do the best we can to restore the simplicity of the early church.

Caleb has chosen some songs along these lines, but as we start preparing our minds for the Lord’s Supper, let’s pray together:

Our Father in Heaven,

We praise you this morning as the creator and designer of your kingdom, the church. Thank you for giving us your word as a guide. We pray for wisdom and we pray for humility as we do the best we can to love each other and to honor you in everything we do. We are thankful for this congregation. We pray that you will bless the elders of this congregation, that they as a group may both lead and serve under Jesus as the Chief Shepherd.

We come to you through Jesus, who purchased the church with his own blood. Thank you, Father!
AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com