

Examples: When Do We Follow?

Perhaps one of the most disputed concepts of understanding God's revealed will for us comes in the form of how we interpret biblical examples. Of course, the Bible is full of examples, and we are left to determine whether we should follow the examples that are given, or consider them to be merely suggestions of how things might be done. Earlier in this study, we posed the question: "Is the Bible literal or figurative?" We pointed out that we cannot answer that question with a blanket response. Sometimes a passage speaks literally, while other times the author is conveying a figurative point. Only by considering the context may one discover whether a passage is to be taken literally or figuratively. Evaluating examples is much the same. We can ask the question: "Are we to follow biblical examples?" We cannot answer with a blanket statement. We must consider the context of the particular example and determine if we are to follow suit or not.

Examples are given for a reason...

Some have dismissed the idea of following examples completely, indicating that they do not believe that the examples given in the scriptures have any authoritative value. They are nothing more than good stories, or historical accounts of how those people did things. They have no bearing at all on how we are supposed to do things. The problem with this approach is that it indicates that God revealed information that was not designed to lead His people to "all righteousness."

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

If the scriptures are given to us so that we can use them "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," then all that is given serves to provide us with some avenue of growing to understand what God wants from us. In other words, God gave us these examples for a purpose! We cannot simply dismiss them, or ignore them. We must be willing to evaluate them, and figure out *why* God gave us the examples!

Examples comprise much of our instruction concerning the work and worship of the church, as well as how we are to conduct our daily lives as Christians. There are far more examples as to how we are to behave than there are direct instructions. Rather than simply giving lists comprised of "Thou Shalt" or "Thou Shalt Not" type of instructions, God has revealed His will through the examples of the apostles and the early church. As we read the book of Acts, for example, we see that Luke records what the apostles and early members of the first century church were doing, rather than the direct instructions. We can know what they were told to do by looking at what they were doing! The same principle is evident in the epistles, though we do see more direct instruction given there. However, even in those situations we do not receive direct instruction for us. We only read of the instruction given to those first century churches and brethren, and read about how they responded. In essence, they become our examples to follow.

Consider the first epistle to the Corinthians. Paul wrote giving specific instructions about how to deal with problems and issues that had arisen among them. We can look at the example of the Corinthian church, and learn how to make applications to similar (though not identical) problems

and issues in the local congregation today. So, while we may learn the direct lesson to “purge out the old leaven” from 1 Corinthians 5:7, it is the example expressed in that chapter that helps us to know what the instruction means.

As we have previously seen, nothing written in the scriptures was written directly to us. We are not the primary audience for any passage. We, therefore, learn from the example of those who were the primary audience. If we are to dismiss the whole of biblical example as lacking authoritative value, then we would have nothing left to the New Testament.

Apostolic Example...

We see throughout the New Testament specific instruction given to follow the example of the apostles. Consider Paul’s direct instructions to the Philippians:

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern (Philippians 3:17).

Paul called upon these brethren to follow the example that he was setting for them. They were also to follow the example of those who were following Paul’s example. This illustrates for us our responsibility when examining apostolic example. We follow the examples of those who were following the examples of the apostles. So, when we read about the first century church, who were instructed directly by the apostles, we know what we are supposed to be doing. We do what they did, as they were following the instruction and example of the apostles!

Paul later wrote the following to the Philippian brethren:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:8–9).

Of course, this was not a principle that was reserved only for the brethren in Philippi. Paul would tell others the same thing:

Therefore I urge you, imitate me (1 Corinthians 4:16).

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone’s bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us (2 Thessalonians 3:7–9).

Paul, as he wrote to these congregations, told them to follow the example of the apostles. They needed to listen to the teachings, but they also needed to see what was being done and emulate it. The examples of those who were proclaiming the gospel to them were just as important, and just as authoritative as the direct instructions. They could not dismiss the examples that were given as unimportant. They were not to view those examples as optional. They did not view them as mere suggestions. They were told to follow the examples!

Notice that Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:1, told the Corinthians to imitate him as he also imitated Christ. He instructed these brethren to follow his example, in which he was following the example of Christ! The example of Christ is certainly authoritative. We seek to emulate His example, which is what helps us to become more like Him. Consider one illustration of Jesus’ own instructions to

follow the example that He has left. In John 13, we have the account of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. In that passage, Jesus took on the most demeaning of tasks, taking on the role of the lowest servant to provide a needed service to His disciples. After completing the task, Jesus said to the apostles:

For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you (John 13:15).

Jesus told the disciples that they needed to follow the example He had given to them! He was not giving them an option, or a suggestion. He told them directly that they were supposed to follow the example He gave them. Paul would then, at a later time, tell those he wrote to that they needed to follow the example of those who were following the example of Christ.

When we understand the progression of authority through examples, we must come to understand their importance. We cannot conclude that examples are unimportant, or even less important, than other instructions that have been given to us through God's written word. These examples have been given so that we can know what God expects of us. They relate information that shows us what is approved of by God!

Approved versus unapproved Examples

We do need to realize that there are both positive and negative examples that are present in the New Testament. When we are evaluating an example, there is a need to see whether the example recorded is something that God has approved of, or has disapproved of. Both serve a purpose, leading us to understand how God wants us to act. When we see an example that is not approved of, we know that we are not to put that into our own practices, but rather avoid it.

One example that was not approved of was the actions of Peter concerning the act of eating with the Gentiles.

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? (Galatians 2:11–14)..."

Peter was an apostle, and would certainly influence many with his example. However, on this occasion, he was not displaying the proper action. He was doing something contrary to the instruction of the Lord.

How can we know when an example is not approved of? There are two basic ways. The first is illustrated in the passage above. When something was done that was not approved of, the action was rebuked. We can know that we are not to follow the example of Peter, and those who were led astray by his poor example, because Paul rebuked the action.

The second way we can know a particular example is not approved of is if the action is refuted in some other passage of scripture. We may not have to be told immediately, in the context, that what was done was wrong, but we can know from our knowledge of scripture in general. For example, we know that Judas, after betraying the Lord, went out and hanged himself (Matthew 27:5). We do not suppose we are to follow this apostolic example, as it is clear that Judas' actions came at the end of a long string of bad choices, and sinful practices. We know the value that God places on life, and how that the practice of destroying one's own life stands contrary to the principles that

scripture teaches about preserving life.

These principles are illustrated quite clearly in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. In that epistle, Paul wrote to correct many things that were amiss in the local congregation. We, as we read that epistle, are introduced to the example of the Corinthian church. In many respects, their example was very poor, and we know that to be true because Paul's letter was intended to correct their poor behavior. Paul did not (with very few exceptions) indicate that their practices were correct, and needed to be followed by others.

We can contrast that letter with Luke's historical account of the early church in the book of Acts. Luke recorded the practices of the early churches as they were under the direction of the apostles. The information recorded there paints a vivid picture for us as to the functioning of the early church, without giving any kind of list for the individual activities. We can read about these early churches, and know how we are to act. If they were doing something, we know that God approved because they were acting under the direct instruction and example of the apostles. Unless we find something condemned, either directly or through other passages of scripture, we can know God approved.

Our View of Examples...

Sometimes we are asked the question: When is an example binding? The intent of this question seems to be to distinguish between examples we *have* to follow, as opposed to examples we *may* follow. There is no doubt that there are some examples that must be followed, and some which may be followed, but are not necessary to follow. We must be able to have a way to logically distinguish between the two. How do we know what must be done, as opposed to what may be done?

Let's first consider the approach that asks, "When is an example binding?" This question is perhaps approaching the whole principle of examples from the wrong standpoint. Rather than thinking of examples as being binding or non-binding, it is better to think of examples as being *freeing*. We have, in earlier lessons, shown that there is a need for us to have positive authority for our practices. We showed that we cannot act presumptuously, but rather must have God's approval for our actions. Implementing the teachings found in examples is no different. We do not act unless we have positive authority to do so. So, when we have a positive example, we have information on which to act. We can do nothing without that information, and the positive example frees us to do something.

Once we have an example, we know that we are free to practice whatever might be involved in that particular example. We are not, however, free to practice something else, that is outside of the approved of example. In such a case, we would be acting presumptuously, as we cannot show that God would approve of the practice outside of the example.

When we have multiple examples of how to do something, then we can know that God has approved of more than one way of accomplishing the task that He has given. The more examples that we have of a particular type of practice, the more freedom we have been given to fulfill the instruction. However, when there is only one example that is given, we have much less freedom. We are restrained by the example that has been provided to fulfill the practice just as the example has given.

Let's illustrate this distinction by looking at the example of the church in Troas in Acts chapter 20. Luke records that the church in Troas met "on the first day of the Week...to break bread" (Acts 20:7). This is the only occasion in all of the New Testament that gives the day that the church met together to partake of the Lord's Supper. We know, by having been given this example, that the first day of the week is approved of by God for the partaking of the Lord's Supper. We can therefore safely partake of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, and know that we are doing

something that God approves of. We cannot partake of the Lord's Supper on another day without acting presumptuously, because we do not have any example of the early church doing that. There is also no other information that would indicate that God would be pleased if we were partake of the Lord's Supper on another day. No one was told to do so, nor is God's approval implied anywhere. So we, if we are not going to act presumptuously, must choose to only replicate that which we know to be approved of by God.

The same principle can be seen in Paul's instructions concerning the contribution of the saints. In 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, Paul identified the day that this instruction was to be fulfilled; the first day of the week:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).

Here, Paul gave specific instructions to the church at Corinth concerning the collection of funds that they were to take up. When we couple this with Paul's earlier statements that he taught the same thing in all the churches, we conclude that the instructions given to the Corinthians in this specific case are intended for all Christians. They were taking a "collection for the saints" who were in need, and we can do the same thing, in the same way, even if the saints we are collecting for are not in Judea!

As we look at these examples, there are elements that are not so restrictive. In Acts 20, we are told that the group was meeting in an upper room. Is this a material fact (as is the fact that they were meeting on the first day of the week)? The answer to this question is a clear "No!" How can we know this? Because there are other instructions and examples that have an impact on our understanding! Consider, for example, that Jesus specifically taught that the location of worship would no longer be important in the new covenant:

The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:19-24).

This idea is confirmed by the fact that we see examples of the early church meeting in many different locations throughout the New Testament. They met in outdoor venues (along the river bank), in the houses of brethren, in the portico of the Temple in Jerusalem, as well as other locations. We can, therefore, know that the location of the meeting place is of no consequence.

Material versus Incidental...

The distinction that is made between the information that is provided is that some of the information is material to the practice that is being taught, while other information is incidental to the instructions. Something that is incidental to a particular event means that it really has no bearing on the outcome. It is something that can be there, or not be there. The fact that the church met in an upper room in Troas is incidental to what they were doing. They could do all that they did in that upper room in any other location, and their actions would not be changed. The fact that they met in an upper room is no more significant to their obedience than the fact that Eutychus fell out of the window! Certainly no one would suppose to argue that because a man fell from a window in their assemblies, we *must* have someone fall out of a window in our assemblies!

Quite often, incidental facts are inserted by the inspired writer to help us to understand what happens in the accounting of the events. In this example, it is clear that Luke tells us that the group was meeting in an upper room so that we more fully understand the impact of the account of Eutychus falling from the window. Obviously, this would not have been so dire had they been in a first floor room. So, the location is not given as an example of what must be done, but rather so that we can understand the events as they unfold in Luke's historical account.

We can distinguish between material facts in the actions of the first century church, and the incidental facts by considering all the available information. We must be able to use not only the specific passages under consideration, but also the rest of the scriptures that apply the principle under consideration. For example, consider the practice of baptism. We have multiple examples of baptism that took place in the book of Acts. People were baptized in many different places. There are, with each of those examples, some things in common. The term "baptize" (in some form) is used, indicating, by definition, immersion. Every time a person was converted, they were baptized into Christ. So, when we read of a baptism in the Jordan River, we do not assume that baptism is only valid if performed in the Jordan River. Baptisms were performed in far too many other locations to think that the specific body of water was material to the practice of baptism.

We can also consider the specific example of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. Philip taught this man the gospel as they were traveling along the road, and by happenstance they passed a body of water large enough to perform the baptism:

Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him (Acts 8:36–38).

It is evident that the specific body of water was not of any importance. The act of baptism was important, and Luke provided enough detail for us to be able to see the baptism of this man through his description.

Some argue that we are just choosing what is material and what is incidental in an arbitrary way. We pick what we want to apply, and label the rest as incidental. This may appear to be true if we pick an example from scripture and try to discuss it completely removed from all the rest of scripture. But we cannot examine scripture in such a way. Considering all of what the scriptures have to say on a particular topic is the only way to determine what God's will on that topic is! So, determining that a particular fact that is given is only incidental to the passage is based upon a comparison with other information that impacts our judgment. If we determine that a particular fact is material to the practice we are examining, but it causes a contradiction with another passage, then we have clearly made a mistake.

To illustrate this, consider once again the fact that the church in Troas met in an upper room. If we determine that this fact is material to pleasing God in our assemblies, then when we see other examples, of other places that first century Christians worshiped, we have a problem. They either had to meet in an upper room as well, or their example is not approved. If their example is not approved (a premise for which we have not support) then everything they did in those assemblies would also be disapproved of by God. We would, in this case, lose almost every other example of the first century church assembling together in the first century!

Incidentals do not limit our practices. They simply provide for us factual information to help us to understand what is happening in a particular passage. Paul preached till midnight in Acts 20. This

fact is not provided so that we know we must preach till midnight on every first day of the week, but rather is given so that we have some context for Eutychus falling from the window. We do learn, from this particular example, that preaching in the assemblies is authorized by God!

Common Sense...

Sometimes we spend a lot of time and effort trying to figure out how to prove that we are to follow a particular example, or not follow it. While some examples may be more difficult to decipher, we can often know the answer simply by the common sense that God has given to us for reasoning. Let's return to the example of Judas, who hanged himself after betraying the Lord. Surely we can deduce that we are not to follow in his example! Do we really need a statement telling us to avoid this example? We can usually understand when we have been given a negative example, and know that we are not supposed to follow after it. Likewise, we do not need a statement of approval after every positive example that is provided for us in scripture. We can understand, through the reasoning abilities that God has given to us, that He has provided an example so that we can know what would be pleasing to Him. If His people did something in the first century and He was pleased with it, then we know we can do it now as well! So, while it is important to understand how we get to a valid conclusion with biblical examples, we should not disregard the common sense reasoning abilities that God has provided for us. We use them frequently when communicating in our every day life, and we should use them when studying the word of God! Think of a parent telling stories for their children. They don't have to declare, "I want you to do this..." Or "I'm telling you this so you won't do it yourself..." Usually, by the very nature of the account one can tell whether it is a positive example to be followed, or a negative example to be avoided. We can use the same rationale for evaluating the biblical examples!

Final thoughts...

As we close this lesson, keep in mind the premise that we established earlier in study. We should not be looking at examples, asking if they are *binding*. Rather, we should view examples as *freeing*. We have established through this study that we are supposed to be restrained, acting only when we have positive authority from God to do so.

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Colossians 3:17).

The only way we can do something "in the name of the Lord Jesus", that is, by His authority, is for us to have been told, or shown, that it is pleasing to Him. So, as we consider examples that have been recorded for us in scripture, let us remember that we have been freed to operate in the ways that we see in those positive examples. We are restrained from operating in different ways than what God has revealed. We cannot go beyond, or act presumptuously and think that we are pleasing Him!

Questions...

1. Are we supposed to follow examples from the New Testament today? Why or why not?
2. What would happen to the impact of the New Testament text for us today if examples were not intended to be followed?
3. How did Paul emphasize the importance of the example of the apostles? What did he tell his audiences of the first century concerning examples?
4. How might we tell the difference between an approved example, and an unapproved example?
5. Give an example of an approved and an unapproved example from the New Testament.
6. How should we view the binding nature of examples? Why might it be better to consider examples freeing rather than binding?
7. What is the difference between a material fact in a given example and an incidental fact? Why is it important to be able to identify the difference?