

7. Examples

Since God reigns (Isa. 52:7), we are concerned with the examples God provides in His revelation. When we build something, we often look at patterns or models. We like to see examples of what something should look like. Examples give us a model or picture, showing us what God likes or doesn't like. In our efforts to be conformed to the image of Christ, we need to pay special attention to the Exemplar, Jesus Christ, and to what He authorizes through His chosen apostles (see 1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17). While much can be said about the nature of examples, let's consider some basic principles and check our attitudes about examples.

Basics on Examples

Some ask, "When is an example binding?" That may be the wrong question to start with. Let's ask, "What is God intending to show us?" Instead of a list of "rules," let's think about these principles:

Without any indication from God (general or specific), we should not presume to know God's will. His silence is not an open invitation to do whatever we wish. A positive example shows that God approves of something; He is not silent. He has shown what He likes and we should try to follow it if possible. The fact that He has shown us something means that we may then act in that same way, insofar as we are able, with God's approval. However, if there is no further information given about that issue, then we should act based on what He has shown rather than what He has not shown. The question is, what does the example show us to do or not do?

Examples illustrate how we may act with God's approval, and those examples give us freedom to so act. For instance, God shows approval, through an example, of His disciples coming together on the first day of the week to partake of the Lord's supper (Acts 20:7). By following this example, we can know God is pleased. In this way, God shows us what He wants by giving examples of how to please Him. How do we know we are on the right track here? First, because the Lord tells us that we are to consider what the apostles show us through their examples (Phil. 3:17; 4:9). Second, if the apostles were acting upon the authority of God, then what they do by God's approval is significant. They spoke by God's authority, and we are told to listen to them as we would Christ (John 13:20; John 16:13; Gal. 4:14; 1 Cor. 14:37).

We may not have all recorded statements of what God said, but when an action was done with God's approval through the apostles, then God already authorized it. They weren't just making things up as they go. When we imitate what we are shown, we know we are acting upon God's

authority because positive examples illustrate actions that are permitted and desired by God.

Simplifying Examples

We are to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind (Mark 12:30). When we see examples of God's people doing what pleases Him, should we not desire to follow their examples? If we ask, "But is that example binding?" aren't we really asking, "Do we have to?" Wouldn't those who love God want to follow an example that God saw fit to show us? Let's ask instead, "What does this show us about what God desires?" By God's grace we have an example of something that He likes. The Scriptures aren't huge, so when an example shows God's approval, wouldn't those who love Him want to take special note? If we are able, and if our circumstances are comparable, wouldn't we want to follow what God, in His grace, found important enough to include in His message?

Which God-pleasing example would we not want to follow? Is there a specific case of His disciples acting with His approval that we would look at and say, "No, we don't want to do that"? If we are able, and our situation is comparable, should we look at something that pleases Him, argue it is not necessary, then ignore it? What should be our attitude toward such examples?

Are there details in examples that are not necessary? We recognize, in normal communication, that not every detail is as significant as another. For instance, if I show someone how I want a task to be accomplished on a computer, and in the process of this I sit in a chair with my feet crossed, am I necessarily suggesting that the person I am showing must sit in the chair in the same position, or is the intended example focused on the computer task? As in all communication, we need common sense as we infer significance and discern between the purpose of the example and the incidental details in the telling of the event.

In Acts 20, when the disciples came together on the first day of the week to break bread (the Lord's Supper), was the focus of this on their meeting in an upper room, or is the intended focus on their meeting to break bread? Where they met is incidental. What they met for is integral, and we need to see that difference. We need common sense, keeping passages in context and recognizing the difference between an incidental of telling what happened and core issues that led to the disciples acting as they did in the first place. Are we capable of drawing reasonable conclusions about these? We do that in our normal communication. Are we not capable here?

God chose to include examples of His people acting for a reason. Those who love Him ought to look at those examples and, as much as within their abilities, and where the circumstances compare, follow them. Why ask, "Do I have to?" (i.e., "Is it binding?") When God has, in His

wisdom, provided a look into the actions that He likes, those who love Him should want to do the same. That's a foundational starting point from which the particular examples can be examined. From there we can consider how comparable the examples are to our circumstances. If our circumstances are not very comparable (e.g., specific issues with miraculous gifts), then we may have little application to make of that specific case. No example can be followed when there is no comparable situation to which we can apply it. If it is comparable, then in what ways? What is the context of the example and how does it fit with our context? Is it an example of individual or group action? What is the core issue of the example? What are the incidentals? What shall we take away from it? How may we apply it? These are the types of questions we want to consider.

Acts 20:7 as an Example

The disciples gathered together on the first day of the week in order to “break bread.” This shows both timing and purpose, and context implies more than just a common meal intended. Acts 2:42 shows that disciples “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” This was not just an ordinary meal or secular gathering.

Elsewhere Paul refers to the Lord’s Supper in this way: “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Partaking of the “one bread” and “the bread which we break” refer to the sharing in the body of Christ in this special meal. We know that God desires for Christians to partake of the Lord’s Supper, since the Lord commanded it (Matt. 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Both biblically and historically, we know that disciples met on the first day of the week for this purpose. Paul and his company stayed seven days at Troas in order to do this (cf. also Acts 21:4; 28:14). That the first day of the week was the common meeting day is seen also in passages like 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, where the instructions presuppose that they met on this day regularly. The first day of the week makes sense since it was both the day that Christ rose from the dead and the day of Pentecost on which the Holy Spirit came with power in order to usher in the new era of the church. Acts 2:42 implies that they began breaking bread in this way on that Pentecost, and continued regularly doing so. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

We see “first day of the week” significance in both what we are told and shown. We know nothing of other days that disciples met to partake of the Lord’s Supper because we have no other information given to us about it. Jesus gave instructions on the Passover, but He said He would later partake of it in His kingdom, which takes us again to the day of Pentecost. The only example

we have when disciples came together to take the Lord's Supper is on the first day of the week. This is what God shows us, and this is what the Christians, with God's approval, did in the first century. Can we agree on this and practice it? Should we do more than that?

Conclusion

Examples are an important part of Scripture. Through them, God shows us what He likes or doesn't like. If we are able, and if our circumstances are comparable, then we ought to follow these examples. Further, we ought to act based upon what we know from what we are told and shown, not on what we don't know due to what God hasn't revealed. Loving God, will we choose to act on what we see God showing us and teach others the same?

Discussion Questions

1. Why is a pattern significant when we want to know how to do something?
2. How do examples illustrate what God likes or doesn't like?
3. Why is asking, "Is that example binding?" probably not the best question to ask as a starting point? What kind of attitude might that reveal?
4. How can we know that God is pleased when we follow particular examples in Scripture?
5. What should our starting attitude be as we consider any given example, and why?
6. Why is it important to consider whether the context of an example is comparable to our circumstances today?
7. Why is an example, like the one found in Acts 20:7, important to us now?
8. What indicators do we have that the first day of the week is a day God wants disciples meeting?