

# “THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

## When Are Examples Binding?

By Joe R. Price

That the New Testament of Christ provides examples to follow is beyond successful dispute. The question this article raises is not, “Are there examples we should follow?” but, “Are there examples we must follow?” And, if so, which ones? An example is defined as an exhibit or specimen, given for imitation or warning (*Strong’s Concise Dictionary*, I:74). For instance, Jesus said, “*For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you*” (Jn. 13:15). When referring to his conduct at Ephesus, Paul said, “*I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak*” (Acts 20:34-35). Are these exhibitions of humility and service binding on us today? We believe they are. Does that mean we must actually wash feet and make tents in order to successfully follow them? How do we distinguish between when an example is binding and when it is not? That is what this article addresses.

### Binding Examples are Apostolic

For an example to be binding, it must pass the test of apostolicity. The Scriptures teach we can, and must, respect and follow the binding nature of apostolically approved examples. We say apostolic, because the Holy Spirit revealed and inspired God’s will by these inspired men (Jn. 16:12-13; 1 Cor. 2:1-13; 14:37). The Scriptures they left us authorize whatever we say and do (Col. 3:16-17; Acts 2:42; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). By receiving the apostles, we receive the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit (Jn. 13:20).

We are commanded to follow the apostles’ examples. Consider these passages that require us to follow apostolic examples: “*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*” (1 Cor. 11:1). “*Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern*” (Phil. 3:17). “*The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you*” (Phil. 4:9).

Apostolic approved examples are the consistent pattern of conduct by Christians and churches under apostolic teaching and practice. 1 Corinthians 4:16-17 establishes the binding nature of apostolic examples. Paul wrote, “*Therefore I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church*” (1 Cor. 4:16-17).

It is “*my ways in Christ*” – the faithful ways of the apostle – that forms binding examples for us. The faithful actions of the apostles set a pattern for us to follow (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:4, 7, 9). We must note that not every example of the apostles should be followed; only those that are true to Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). Recall that Peter set a bad example of favoritism and hypocrisy in Antioch (that Barnabas and others followed), which Paul exposed as transgression (Gal. 2:11-14, 18). We certainly are not to follow their examples of unbelief and hardness of heart (Mk. 16:14). The Scriptures show when the apostles’ conduct was divinely approved, and therefore worthy of our imitation.

### Binding Examples are Universal

For an example to be binding, it must pass the test of universality. Regardless of place and time, an example’s worldwide scope commends its authoritative nature. To illustrate, “*Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight*” (Acts 20:7). Wherever we are on the planet, there is a first day of the week on which to eat the Lord’s Supper. The apostle Paul participated in such worship, thereby setting a pattern for us to follow (Phil. 3:17; 4:9). Unless an example can meet the test of “*everywhere in every church,*” it not binding upon men (1 Cor. 4:17).

## Binding Examples are Uniform

For an example to be binding, it must pass the test of uniformity. Paul's "*ways in Christ*" were taught "*everywhere in every church*" (1 Cor. 4:17). There is a consistency or uniformity to examples that obligate us to them. For instance, every example of the action of water baptism involves "*much water,*" "*going down into the water,*" and coming "*up out of the water*" (Jn. 4:23; Matt. 3:16; Acts 8:38-39). The examples of baptism uniformly show it to be immersion in water. To sprinkle or pour water is an addition to God's word (1 Cor. 4:6; Gal. 1:6-10; 2 Jn. 9; Rev. 22:18-19). At the same time, there is no uniformity concerning the source or body of water used in baptism. I know of a person who believes one must be baptized in the Jordan River, since that is where Jesus was baptized. Yet, we also have an example of a baptism in "*some water*" in a deserted place (Acts 8:26, 36, 38). Wherever there is enough water to immerse a person is the right place to baptize the believing, repentant sinner (Acts 10:47-48; 16:13-15; 18:8; 22:16).

Where there is not consistency of action, then we rightly conclude that action is not a binding part of the example. For instance, when we worship on the first day of the week, we are not limited to assembling in a three-story building illuminated by fire (Acts 20:8-9). Churches met in many places in the New Testament (Acts 5:12; 1 Cor. 11:20; 16:19). There is no uniformity in the examples of where churches met to worship. Therefore, we cannot bind the place the church meets for worship.

## Binding Examples are Relevant

For an example to be binding, it must pass the test of relevancy. Not every example recorded in the Bible is relevant and applicable to us. King David led Israel in worshiping God with musical instruments when the ark of the covenant was moved to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 15:25-29). They also offered animal sacrifices before God on the same occasion (v. 26; 1 Chron. 16:1-2). None of these examples of worship are binding (authoritative) on us, since they occurred under the old covenant given only to Israel, a covenant that has been done away (Rom. 7:1-4; 2 Cor. 3:14; Gal. 3:24-25; Eph. 2:14-15; Col. 3:14; Heb. 8:6-13). We follow New Testament examples (Matt. 28:18-20).

## Binding Examples are Pertinent

For an example to be binding, it must pass the test of materiality. Some things in an example are not germane to accomplishing God's stated purpose, while other things are. We must distinguish between essentials and incidentals in order to know when an example is binding on us. Water is essential for baptism, but running water is not (Jn. 4:23; Acts 8:36-39). Eating unleavened bread and drinking fruit of the vine are essential to partaking of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-28). The number of containers we use when we "*eat this bread*" and "*drink this cup*" are incidental (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

## Binding Examples are Harmonious with Truth

For an example to be binding, it must pass the test of spiritual harmony. Before attempting to bind an example, one must be sure it does not violate revealed truth. Does the example agree with Biblical teaching? Or, does it cause a violation of God's will? Peter's shameful treatment of Gentile brethren, and the Corinthian church's tolerance of sexual sin, are obviously not binding examples (Gal. 2:11-16; 1 Cor. 5:1-13). Clearly, we are not to follow the example of Judas hanging himself when we are remorseful (Matt. 27:3-5).

## Conclusion

We are commanded to follow apostolic examples (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 4:9). Rejecting the binding nature of New Testament examples contradicts God's word. Consistent examples of practice, under the participation and direction of the apostles of Christ, continue to bind God's authority on individual Christians and on local churches. — *The Spirit's Sword*, July 28, 2019. ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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