

Copying the Apostles

“We need to get back to the early church!”

Sounds familiar? I have heard it said several times in church circles. They had the power and the glory then; we need it now. Who could argue with the idea?

Well, here goes. Once again, we find that this approach tends to be selective.

The first act of the apostles was to bring their number back up to twelve, following the death of Judas Iscariot. This was done by drawing lots after prayer. I am aware of one Christian group in Germany which follows this practice today, but most churches have not thought that it was a practice to follow. Why not, if we are to copy the apostles?

“Ah, but this was before the Spirit came.”

Right. So we are to follow the apostles when Spirit filled.

“Yes. And look what happened when they had an unending prayer meeting 120 strong – the Holy Spirit came in great power.” (See Acts 1:14).

Well yes he did, but this was in fulfilment of Jesus’ promise. The instruction Jesus gave was not, ‘Hold a prayer meeting and I will send the Spirit’, but rather, ‘Stay in Jerusalem until the Spirit comes’ (verse 8). Also, you have just shot yourself in the foot. This large prayer meeting is in the same category as the drawing of lots: it happened before the Spirit came. So if you are going to enthuse about one, then maybe you should enthuse about the other as well.

“Yes, but look: they used to meet together for teaching, breaking of bread, praying in the temple, and they even held everything in common. Peter and John used to attend a daily prayer meeting at three p.m.” (Acts 2:42 – 3:1).

Indeed. But need I point out that the story of Peter and John tells how they never got to the prayer meeting because of the man outside the door who needed help. His healing, in obedience to a command of Jesus to heal the sick, was what led to a great expansion of the church (4:4).

“Yes, but in Acts chapter thirteen, we read ‘While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, send out Paul and Barnabas...’ and the gospel surged forward in a new wave. You see?!”

“Gathering to worship is vital” say some. “Fasting is important,” say others. I don’t often hear “Worshipping with fasting is important.” In fact, I don’t think I have ever heard that said. Interesting.

What I see is what is written. It does not say, ‘Because they were worshipping the Lord and fasting’, but ‘While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting’. Notice how easy it is to make Scripture say what we want it to say rather than what it actually does say. See a causative connection if you like: my point is that we do not need to. It’s a matter of taste and inclination.

What I am driving at is this. There is a strong urge in all of us for churches to hold meetings which are religious in some way. I think it is a facet of human nature. All over the globe, people's response to the idea that there is a god is to erect a shrine and worship him. All religions have it. Thousands of them.

I think the Christian way that Jesus wanted us to pursue is different. We are encouraged to meet together, yes, but the purpose is to stir one another up to good deeds. See Hebrews 10 verse 24 as well as verse 25.

Christian meetings should take place, but they should be more like a military briefing. Imagine a conversation.

Leader addressing the gathering. "Okay, now how's the outreach going on the new housing estate?"

Home group leader. "We invited people in for a pot luck supper, and when we broke bread in the middle, the guests were intrigued as to what we were doing. They were all interested, and two look as if they might give their lives to Jesus. But we could use some help visiting in Elm Road and Oak Crescent as we are rather stretched."

This kind of planning meeting would have obeying Jesus as its aim and focus. The main meeting of the seventeen churches I have been involved in during my life has been on Sunday mornings. I must have attended three thousand such events by now. Add on weekday meetings, prayer meetings, committee meetings and the number must be over ten thousand. To my memory, not one of them has ever had an exchange like the one I have just imagined. Strategic planning towards how we can obey Jesus by making all nations Jesus' disciples has not happened. It happens in missionary societies, but we don't call missionary societies churches. Can that be right?

Well perhaps you don't like my approach and want churches to stick with following the apostles. If so, please will you listen to Peter, the head of the church, when he was stood in front of the hostile Sanhedrin, talking about what was going on in Jerusalem?

"We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him (Acts 5:32)."

I believe the church desperately needs to recapture the idea that we obey Jesus on all points and forget our other traditions and practices. That is the route to being filled with the Spirit and being salt and light in today's needy world.

This explains something I have noticed in one church I was in. Frequently on a Sunday morning, before the service began, a little group of us would be praying, and someone would claim the promise in prayer that where two or three are met together in Jesus' name, he would be present in the midst (Matthew 18:20). A great prayer. The only trouble was, more often than not, I did not sense the presence of Jesus in the meeting much at all. Was this my failure? I think not, because I can recall meetings where there has been no doubt that God was very much present.

No, I think our prayer puts Jesus In an awkward position. We have gathered to worship together, to ask God to heal the sick and intercede for what happens to be in the news that week, to hear a talk on a Bible passage, perhaps to break bread but without the meal it was meant to accompany (how can that be right?), none of which Jesus called for. We ignore what he did ask for – ‘Teach them to observe what I have commanded you’ (the twelve, Matthew 28:20). I did a survey of Sunday morning talks once, and out of one hundred and eighty, just two were on commands of Jesus. One of those was a last minute scramble by someone who admitted he did not know he was due to speak.

So our meetings were not really being held in Jesus’ name at all. Hence his reluctance to attend.

I write in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. I think it is God’s pandemic, but I understand if you find that idea difficult. To me the question of today is, why has God sent it? I don’t hear many answers to that.

What we can agree on is that there is an epidemic of loneliness in our country, the suicide rate has rocketed, and there are many people trying to replace our Christian understanding of how to live with something else. This is not the hour for the church to stream more services and hold zoom meetings and hurry to re-start our gatherings together. It’s a time to get on with the great commission we have been given and bring good news to the poor.

If you are persuaded, then here’s a useful tip for leaders and speakers. You will have fulfilled all Christian teaching if you say this single sentence to your people :-

Do everything that Jesus commanded the twelve.

Now that’s done, let’s crack on with what he asked us to do, and the Spirit will be with us.

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