

# ARE BIBLE EXAMPLES BINDING?

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## Introduction

The question of the title above is actually asking: “Are Bible Examples Binding on Mankind **Today**?” This question suggests at least the following additional questions:

- Are **all** Bible examples binding today?
- Are **some** Bible examples binding today?
- Are **no** Bible examples binding today?

“Examples” of words spoken or deeds done are only one category of Biblical “statements.” The same questions are appropriate concerning all other types of statements in the Bible (e.g., direct statements, whether imperative, declarative, or interrogative) that include various commands (whether directly from Deity or indirectly from Him through an inspired spokesman).

Surely, none would assert that **all** statements in the Bible (of whatever type) are binding upon men today, for this assertion is easily falsified (as I will illustrate below). Likewise, it would be foolish to argue that **no** statements in the Bible (including examples) are binding (if this were so, the atheist would be correct in his evaluation of the Bible as a mere nonauthoritative curiosity piece and relic). We must therefore conclude that **some** statements (including Bible “examples”) are binding upon men today.

The fuller and truly vital question that the title of this MS implies, therefore, is, “How does one determine **which** Bible examples are binding today?” This question

takes us immediately to the subject of Biblical hermeneutics—the principles of interpretation that must be employed in order to “*handle aright the word of truth*” (2 Tim. 2:15).<sup>1</sup> Only by correct application of correct hermeneutics have men ever been able, in whatever age, to properly apply the Scriptures to themselves. Space limitations will not permit an exhaustive treatment of this subject, but I hope to provide some significant guidelines.

Before proceeding, let me clarify the meaning of *Bible examples* in our title. The word *example* is somewhat ambiguous since it is capable of various shades of meaning (e.g., one part representing the whole, a pattern of behavior, punishment designed to warn others, a precedent, et al.). The phrases, *account of action* and *record of behavior*, are far more precise terms than *example*, and I will therefore employ them throughout this study. The MS title embraces the records of behavior of human beings in both the Old and New Testaments.

### **Some Historical Background**

The question before us is likely one that sincere Bible students have grappled with for centuries. However, among brethren the question of “binding examples” was dramatically thrust to the forefront in modern times at the turn of the twentieth century in the anti-cooperation and anti-orphan home controversy. Those who opposed congregational cooperation in evangelism and support of orphan homes from church treasuries asserted that there were “exclusive patterns” (by which they meant “examples” or records of behavior) in Scripture that forbade these actions.

The numerous debates that occurred on these subjects forced brethren to devote serious study to this facet of hermeneutics, which (though unconvincing to the “anti”

brethren) proved to be a healthy exercise.<sup>2</sup> This study led to much greater precision in thinking, expression, and interpretation. While the “anti” issue is not the inflammatory one it was for more than a decade (though we must remain ever vigilant concerning that mentality), the hermeneutical principles that were forged in that furnace of controversy relative to Scriptural accounts of action are helpful to us in application to other issues.

The late Thomas B. Warren was somewhat of a trailblazer in this area of study, and the principles he hammered out in the course of meeting the threat of “anti-ism” have stood the test of time. He both served as moderator for others who debated the “anti” issues (e.g., Guy N. Woods vs. Roy E. Cogdill, 1957) and debated them himself (e.g., with Ira Douthitt). Unfortunately, His work in these debates is not in print. However, we do have two works from him from that era that bear on our subject: First is his book (still in print at this writing), *Lectures on Church Cooperation and Orphan Homes*, which consists of transcribed sermons delivered at the Burbank Gardens Church of Christ, Grand Prairie, Texas, in 1958. Second is his chapter, “Examples in Pattern Authority,” in the 1960 Abilene Christian College Lectureship book. However, the maturity of his thinking on the subject before us is in a later (1975) book, originally titled, *When Is an “Example” Binding?* but in its latest reprint (2001), titled, *When Is a Bible Example Binding?* Much of what I have learned on this subject will reflect the good work he did and left with us in this important field of study.

### **What About Old Testament Accounts of Action?**

Man’s amenability or non-amenability to the Old Testament remains a major hermeneutical stumbling block to practically all of the Protestant and Catholic world. This issue is relevant to the subject before us. What about the records of Old Testament

behavior—are they binding upon us? According to Paul, the entire Bible is applicable in some sense to Christians (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Further, we should “learn” from the Old Testament accounts of behavior and teaching: “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope.” (Rom. 15:4).

While these passages tell us that the Old Testament is applicable to Christians in some sense, numerous passages teach that no one who has lived since the cross has been subject to the **authority** of the Old Testament. Jesus took the old law out of the way, symbolically “nailing it to the cross” when He died thereon (Col. 2:14). He took away the first covenant that He might establish His new covenant (Heb. 10:9–10), which was prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:8–12; 10:16–17). Many other passages thus teach (e.g., Rom. 7:1–6; Gal. 3:23–25; Eph. 2:14–16; et al.). To seek salvation by keeping that law sunders one from Christ and from God’s grace (Gal. 5:4), thus we not only are **not obligated** to keep its specific ordinances, we **are forbidden** to do so. Between the cross and the Lord’s return, God exercises His authority solely through His Son by means of the New Testament (Mat. 17:5; 28:18; Heb 1:1–4; et al.), not by means of any earlier covenants.

It is apparent from the above that no man living today is bound by the **specific stipulations** of the Old Testament (e.g., the offering of the blood of bulls and goats), including the accounts of behavior of those who lived under it (e.g., building an ark). Although inspired by the same Holy Spirit and just as much the Word of God as the New Testament is, its **authority** over men as a legal system ended at the cross. Since we are not under its authority, including its records of behavior, in what sense might

those records be relevant to us? Their relevance lies in the fact that God never changes (Jam. 1:17). Therefore, the **principles** by which He deals with men and even His basic requirements of men in response (e.g., humility, faith, and obedience, et al.) have remained constant through the ages. Thus He acted in the Old Testament upon the same basic principles upon which He acts in the New Testament era.

Paul illustrated at least one way in which we are to “learn” from the Old Testament. He rehearsed some of the sins of Israel and then stated specifically that their behavior should serve as **a model** of the way Christians should **not** behave:

Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted.... Now these things happened unto them by way of example; and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).

Paul clearly used these Old Testament accounts of action to bind upon Christians how **not** to behave. James cited the behavior of the prophet Elijah:

Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit (Jam. 5:17–18).

Surely, even a novice in the Scriptures can see that it was not James’s intent was to bind upon his Christian readers a duty to pray for a three and one-half year drought, after which we would pray for a downpour. Rather, he emphasized the **principle** of the need for fervency and persistence in prayer, which numerous passages emphasize by direct statement (Mat. 7:7–11; Eph. 6:18; 1 The. 5:17).

The New Testament mentions a host of Old Testament events and characters for the specific purpose of variously:

1. Binding upon Christians certain attitudes and/or actions,
2. Indicating that certain attitudes and/or actions are permissible but not binding, or
3. Binding prohibitions upon us (as in Paul's examples cited above).

Since we have seen (1) that the Old Testament was "written for our learning," but (2) that the specific details of neither the practices recorded in the Old Testament nor the Old Testament law itself are bound upon us, we must conclude (3) that the way in which the Old Testament records of behavior apply to us is by the enduring **principles** they teach.

In application, then, the lesson from the record of Noah's behavior in Genesis 6 is not that anyone living today (or any other one who ever lived, for that matter) must build an ark. Rather, his behavior demonstrates (among other things) the enduring and binding **principles** (1) that we must obey God without question (Gen. 6:22) and (2) that Biblical, availing faith involves obedience to God (Heb. 11:7). Similarly, the account of Abraham's offering Isaac (Gen. 22:1–14) does not bind anyone to offer his son as a burnt offering, but it does bind the principles of an unwavering faith and a totally unreserved obedience. The account of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1–2) binds the principle of doing only that which is authorized by God, which applies directly to such things as the kind of music we can employ in worship, the elements we can use in the Lord's supper, and such like. The reader can multiply these examples with little difficulty.

In summary, Old Testament accounts of action are relevant to us today only in principle, but never in specific details, because the Old Testament has been repealed

as a body of law. Whether or not an Old Testament account of action is binding on us today **in principle** must be determined by:

1. Carefully examining the account itself
2. Carefully examining the immediate context
3. Carefully examining the remote context (i.e., all that the Bible says about the subject under consideration)
4. Then drawing only the conclusions which our examination warrants

### **What About New Testament Accounts of Action?**

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, “examples” or accounts of action constitute only one of several ways in which the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) imparts information. Just as not every account of action places us under obligation to act in a certain way, so it is with other types of statements in the New Testament (including imperative statements issued in the form of commands). As already demonstrated, all who have lived since the cross are accountable to the New Testament of Christ. But this does not imply that we are thereby obligated to carry out every command or emulate every account of action it contains. Has anyone ever suggested that the Lord’s command to Saul, “But rise, and enter into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do” (Acts 9:6) applies directly to everyone? Does Paul’s imperative statement (command) concerning the gift of prophecy and other miraculous gifts apply to us? “Follow after love; yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1).

We conclude, then, that we are not obligated to obey these and other direct imperative statements by employing the same hermeneutical formula iterated at the close of the section on Old Testament accounts of action:

1. We examine the statement itself (upon which we see that the Lord miraculously and exclusively addressed himself to an individual)
2. We examine the immediate context (upon which we find Saul of Tarsus approaching Damascus to persecute Christians, and upon seeing and hearing the Lord, he believes in Him, but is still not saved)
3. We examine the remote context (the rest of the Bible) (upon which we find no like command ever given to anyone, indicating that it is unique to the situation and the individual)
4. In light of the results of our examination, we correctly deduce that Saul alone was bound by this command, which when obeyed would providentially place him in contact with Ananias, the Lord's messenger.

Scores of such commands are found in the New Testament that relate to details that were either unique and/or merely incidental and that therefore exclude them from being universal obligations.

When we analyze the various records of behavior in the New Testament, we can observe two major categories:

1. Accounts of action that are **authorized** by God. These include both obligatory and optional actions.
2. Accounts of action that are **unauthorized** by God. These include actions both explicitly and implicitly forbidden, those that bind what God has not bound, and those that forbid what God has authorized.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, only the accounts of action that indicate behavior that is authorized by God could serve as binding accounts of action. However, it should be noted that the mere fact that a record of behavior is authorized does not imply that it is obligatory. It

may be optional. Just as obviously, those accounts of action that represent unauthorized behavior are excluded from being obligatory.

### **Detailed List and Illustrations of Classifications of Actions**

An even more detailed analysis of various kinds of actions recorded in the New Testament will perhaps be helpful. It includes the following:

1. Sinful and permanent actions—sinful for first-century Christians and for us today.
2. Optional and temporary actions—optional for first-century brethren, but sinful if practiced today.
3. Optional and permanent actions—optional for first-century brethren and for us today.
4. Obligatory and temporary actions—obligatory for first-century brethren, but not obligatory for us today.
5. Obligatory and permanent actions—obligatory for first-century brethren and obligatory for us today.<sup>4</sup>

Below I will present an illustration of each of the kinds of accounts of actions listed in the previous section. Bear in mind that these may include not only activities, but words spoken as well. Among other things, Paul exhorted Timothy to be “an ensample to them that believe, in word,” as well as “in manner of life” (1 Tim. 4:12). The Greek word rendered “ensample” refers to a pattern or a model to be emulated, so Timothy’s very words could serve as accounts of action. Now we will consider illustrations of the various kinds of actions.

## ***Sinful and Permanent Actions***

Actions of this sort were sinful in the first century and will never cease to be sinful till time is no more. Such actions would thus be sinful for us today. Acts 5:40 illustrates this classification of action, which **account of the action** states: “And...when they had called the apostles unto them, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.” These words describe the last part of a trial of the apostles before the Jewish Sanhedrin court. These judges physically assaulted the apostles, commanded them not to preach the Gospel any more in Jerusalem, and then released them.

The **immediate context** indicates that this was the third time some or all of the apostles had been arrested in the initial outbreak of opposition against the infant church. Peter and John had earlier been arrested, imprisoned, and tried before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1–17). Upon being charged not to preach in the name of Jesus, Peter replied that they must hearken unto God rather than to men and that they would continue to preach (vv. 18–20). The council then threatened them and let them go, fearing the people if they punished them (v. 21).

The second arrest involved several, if not all of the apostles, and from this imprisonment an angel of the Lord miraculously freed them before they could be tried (5:17–19). When the council came together to try them, the officers that were sent for them reported that the prisoners were missing (vv. 21b–24). When one reported that they were in the temple teaching, the court had them arrested a third time (vv. 26–28). When asked why they had ignored the order to cease preaching, Peter spoke his courageous words, “We must obey God rather men” (v. 29). There was strong

sentiment in favor of killing the apostles (v. 33), but upon the counsel of Gamaliel, one of the judges, they decided not to (vv. 34–39). Instead, they beat them, commanded them to preach the Gospel no more in Jerusalem, and then released them (v. 40).

The **remote context** reveals many passages concerning God’s attitude toward those who persecute His faithful servants. God’s prophets in the Old Testament were constantly persecuted, and the persecutors are always depicted as evil men and enemies of God. Jesus said that those thus mistreated would be “blessed” and would have a great reward in Heaven (Mat. 5:10–12). When He chose His apostles, the Lord warned them that they would be arrested, tried, and scourged (as Acts 4–5 records they were), and their own families would deliver them to their enemies (Mat. 10:16–39). He scathingly denounced the Jewish persecutors of the faithful (23:39–37).

The **deduction from the analysis** is that the behavior of the Sanhedrin in arresting, trying, and beating the apostles was action that is **permanently sinful** and that this account of action demonstrates unauthorized behavior for all men. For additional accounts of action in this category, see Matthew 26:47 (Judas’ betrayal kiss of Jesus), Matthew 26:69–70 (Peter’s denial of Jesus), Acts 7:54–60 (the Jews’ stoning of Stephen), Acts 12:1–2 (Herod’s killing of James the apostle), and Galatians 2:12 (Peter’s hypocritical behavior toward Gentile brethren in Antioch). Numerous other such instances illustrate permanently sinful accounts of action, all of which are binding on us today in a prohibitory way.

## ***Optional and Temporary Actions***

These accounts of actions were optional for first-century brethren, but they would not be optional for us today. In fact, they would be sinful if we practiced them. They are therefore only **temporarily** optional. Acts 10:27–28 illustrates this classification of action, which **account of the action** states:

And as he talked with him, he went in, and findeth many come together: and he said unto them, Ye yourselves know how it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to join himself or come unto one of another nation; and yet unto me hath God showed that I should not call any man common or unclean.

Peter spoke these words in the house of Cornelius, the Gentile, indicating that he had until this time labored under the conviction that Gentiles were “unclean,” that Jews were to have no social intercourse with them, and that they were therefore unworthy of the Gospel of Christ.

The **immediate context** indicates that Peter had been in the town of Joppa, not far from Caesarea, the home of Cornelius (Acts 9:43–10:1). Luke describes this Roman soldier, a Gentile, as sincerely religious and doing his best to worship and serve God (perhaps as a Jewish proselyte) (vv. 1–2). An angel of God appeared to him, telling him that God had taken note of his devotion and that he was to send to Joppa for Simon Peter (vv. 3–7). While the servants were on their way, Peter was praying while awaiting preparation of the noon meal. As he prayed he saw a vision of a container descending, containing a variety of clean and unclean forms of life, as classified by the law of Moses (vv. 8–12). Since Peter was hungry, the voice that accompanied the vision told him to kill and eat some of these, but Peter, even though he perceived the voice to be the Lord’s, refused on the ground that some of them were unclean. This conversation

between the apostle and the Lord was repeated twice more before the vision ceased (vv. 13–16).

As Peter pondered the meaning of the vision, the servants of Cornelius arrived and inquired for him. At this moment, the Holy Spirit told him that he was to go with these men without hesitation (although they were Gentiles) because He had sent them (vv. 17–20). When Peter asked the purpose of their seeking him, they told him of Cornelius' devoutness, of his conversation with the angel, and of the angel's instruction to bring Peter back to Caesarea to teach him (vv. 21–22).

After lodging that night in Joppa, the servants of Cornelius, Peter, and six brethren journeyed to Caesarea the next day to find that Cornelius had gathered several others in his house in eager anticipation of Peter's arrival (vv. 23–24). The Gentile centurion first fell at Peter's feet to worship him, which Peter immediately forbade on the ground that he was also a mere man (wholly out of character with the Roman Catholic popes, Peter's alleged "successors") (vv. 25–26).

Peter reminded this Gentile that association with him was "unlawful" for a Jew, but told him that God had demonstrated to him that he was no longer to make such distinctions (Peter now understood the purpose of the vision in Joppa) (vv. 27–28). Peter also stated to Cornelius that he **now** perceived, contrary to his previous perception, that God is "no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him" (vv. 34–35).

Peter then began the first Gospel sermon ever preached to Gentiles of which we have a record, but did not get very far until his words were interrupted by a miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit that fell on the listeners, enabling them to speak in

various languages (vv. 36–46). Upon this amazing phenomenon, later identified by Peter as baptism in the Holy Spirit (11:15–16), Peter commanded those Gentiles to be baptized in water in the name of Christ, by implication, unto the remission of the sins, as he had preached to the people on Pentecost (10:47–48; 2:38). Additional and supplementary details relating to this extremely significant occurrence are recorded in Acts 11:1–18, and constitute part of the immediate context.

To summarize, we learn from the immediate context that, between Pentecost and the events in Cornelius' house (perhaps 8–10 years), Jewish Christians (including the apostles) had apparently consciously refused to preach the Gospel to Gentiles. They thus refused because they labored under the perception that Gentiles were “unclean” and were to be avoided in every way by Jews (a traditional misconception likely founded upon God's requirement that they were not to make treaties or intermarry with Gentiles [Exo. 23:32–33; Deu. 7:1–6; et al.]). Now, by means of several miraculous manifestations (viz., the angel appearing to Cornelius, the three-fold vision of Peter, the Holy Spirit's direct instruction to Peter to go to the house of a Gentile, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles), God has demonstrated to the Jews that the Gentiles are included in His Gospel of redemption.

The **remote context** furnishes a multitude of statements that relate to God's inclusion of the Gentiles in his redemptive plan. The promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob included blessing **all nations** through the promised Seed (Gen. 12:3; 26:4; 28:14), which was Christ (Gal. 3:8, 16). Isaiah prophesied that **all nations** would be a part of the church (2:2–3). Jesus taught that he had **other sheep** (i.e., besides the Jews) whom He would bring into His fold (John 10:16). He ordered the apostles to take

the Gospel to **all nations** and to **all the world** and the **whole creation** (Mat. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16).

Numerous other statements indicate clearly that the Gentiles were included in the Gospel plan of salvation (e.g., Luke 24:45–47; John 3:16; Acts 1:8; Eph. 2:11–19; 1 Tim. 2:5–6; Tit. 2:11; et al.). Peter had doubtless read the Old Testament statements about and had heard the Lord’s references to the inclusion of the Gentiles in His plans, but he still failed to apply them properly. He had even declared on Pentecost that the Gentiles were included in God’s plan: “For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him” (Acts 2:39). Those **afar-off** ones who were to receive salvation were the Gentiles.

In spite of all of this, the Jews had not preached the Gospel to Gentiles in the period recorded in Acts 2–9. They had simply failed to understand that the Gospel was for Gentiles as well as for Jews, as the records of Acts 10 and 11 demonstrate. It took several miracles (as listed earlier) to make it unmistakably clear that God included the Gentiles in His plan before Peter would take the Gospel to Cornelius. From the statements Peter made at this Gentile’s house (noted above) and to the brethren at Jerusalem who questioned him about it (Acts 11:15–17), it is evident that Peter was now completely convinced that they should go to the Gentiles.

My **deduction** from the foregoing analysis includes the observation that there is no hint in the Scriptures that the Jews’ neglect of the Gentiles in those early days of the church was sinful. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would **guide** the apostles into all the Truth, rather than dump the entire load of it on them at once (John 16:13). There was apparently a gradual unfolding of the Truth to the inspired men, thus Paul wrote:

“For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away” (1 Cor. 13:9–10). Thus, there were some things that were revealed to them, the significance and implication of which they did not fully grasp immediately. The inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of redemption was one of those things. To associate with Gentiles in such a way as to take the Gospel to them was contrary to centuries of cultural and doctrinal influences among the Jews. God gave them time to come to an understanding of His will in this matter on their own. However, when he saw that they were likely never going to overcome their deep prejudice through correct application of Scripture alone, He stepped in with powerful and irrefutable evidence that convinced them. Of course, He does not so operate today, and has not since the miraculous age ceased to exist (1 Cor. 13:8–13; Eph. 4:8–14).

God was longsuffering with them in that time of spiritual immaturity and in what must have been a most difficult transition for those first-century Jewish Christians. We therefore conclude that their failure to preach to the Gentiles in that interim was counted as temporarily optional. However, after the events at Cornelius’ house, no Jew ever had an excuse thus to behave toward Gentiles. Thus ever since the significant events recorded in Acts 10 and 11, no one has had the option to refuse to take the Gospel to those of other races besides his own, and it is sinful to do so. The case of Paul’s offering the sacrifice in the temple possibly belongs in this same class of accounts of action (Acts 21:20–26).

### ***Optional and Permanent Actions***

Actions of this class were optional for first century brethren and they remain optional for us today. Therefore, there is no sin involved in either doing or in not doing such things. We often refer to these accounts of action as involving the realm of “expediency.” Acts 2:14 illustrates this classification of action, which **account of the action** states: “But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and spake forth unto them, saying, Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and give ear unto my words.” This statement tells us that all of the apostles **stood up** together, and that from among them, Peter spoke up and beckoned for the attention of those assembled. The assembly was made up of Jews and the setting was the city of Jerusalem.

The **immediate context** indicates that the apostles were in Jerusalem, waiting, as the Lord had charged them to do, until He would baptize them in the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:48–49; Acts 1:4–8, 12). They were thus baptized on the day of Pentecost, which baptism was accompanied by spectacular signs and wonders (2:1–4). These miraculous manifestations drew a multitude of people (which included Jews from many nations who were in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost) to the presence of the apostles (vv. 5–6). The crowd marveled at the things they saw and heard, and were perplexed at the meaning of them (vv. 7–13). Finally, the apostles **stood up** and began preaching the first sermon in history that would tell men how to be saved through the blood of Christ, whom those Jews had crucified some seven weeks earlier (vv. 14–40). The preaching on Pentecost resulted in about three thousand baptisms and the establishment of the church (vv. 41–47).

As in many cases, more than one detail is included in this one account recorded in verse 14 (e.g., the presence of twelve men, Peter's leadership, and the very words he said). The one detail to which we call attention is their action in **standing up**. Does this account of action bind upon us only a standing posture as we teach or preach the Gospel?

The **remote context** indicates various postures inspired men have employed in teaching and preaching the Gospel. A summary of these just in the life of the Lord is instructive. Jesus sat down to deliver the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5:1; cf. 13:1; John 4:6–26; et al.). He sat in a boat and addressed the crowd on the shore as he began teaching in parables (Mat. 13:2). He taught the two men on the road to Emmaus as they walked along (Luke 24:13–28). The Lord was apparently in a reclining position as he taught the apostles in the upper room discourse (John 13:12–23). At other times he stood as he preached (7:37). Furthermore, Philip taught the Ethiopian sitting down while riding in a chariot (Acts 8:31–38).

Our **deduction** from the analysis above is that God's people in ages past were not and his people today are not restricted to any one posture as we teach God's Word. The posture one assumes as he teaches or preaches is optional and always will be. It is governed only by what is expedient under the circumstances. Therefore, the apostles were merely engaging in optional behavior when they stood, likely doing so in order to be better seen and heard. Likewise, therefore, the account of their action of standing to preach had no binding force on their contemporaries nor does it have any binding force on us. Similar cases of action in the same class include such things as the sort of structure in which the church met (Acts 20:9), the mode of travel employed in preaching

the Gospel (v. 13), and how long a preacher may stay and work with a congregation (18:11). Perhaps hundreds of such cases could be cited in the New Testament in which it is clear that the Lord allows His people to utilize their best judgment and choose the best option.

Great damage has been done to the cause of Christ through the years by those who have insisted that certain accounts of action which are optional are actually obligatory. Those who insist on using only one cup for the Lord's supper make this mistake. This error is also at the root of the anti-cooperation and anti-orphan home positions. Those who began this movement took (as its current adherents take) such passages as Acts 11:29–30 and 1 Corinthians 11:8; 29–30 and insist that these accounts of action constitute exclusive “patterns” and are therefore obligatory for us today. In reality, when these passages are tested by correct principles of hermeneutics (as we have been applying in this chapter), they are seen to be optional means by which congregations of the Lord's people did and still can cooperate in evangelism and benevolence. To take a record of optional behavior and bind it as one of obligation is to create a law that God did not create. Such action usurps the authority of Christ and it is therefore sinful.

### ***Obligatory and Temporary Actions***

Actions of this class were obligatory for first-century brethren, but they were temporary and are thus not obligatory or even authorized for us today. Hence, it would have been sinful for those in the first-century church to **neglect** actions in this class, and contrariwise, it would be sinful for us to **engage** in these actions. Acts 3:6–7 illustrates this classification of action, which **account of the action** states:

But Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but what I have, that give I thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. And he took him by the right hand, and raised him up: and immediately his feet and his ankle-bones received strength.

In response to a crippled man who had to beg for a living, Peter told him that he had no money to give him. Instead of money, which he did not have, he said he would give the beggar what he had. Thereupon, by the authority of the Christ, he told the man to walk, taking his right hand and pulling him up to encourage him to do so. Upon being thus raised, the cripple found that his feet and ankles—which formerly could not support him— were now miraculously and immediately infused with strength.

The **immediate context** indicates that Peter and John were on their way to the temple in Jerusalem at about 3:00 p.m., a traditional “hour of prayer” (Acts 3:1). As they proceeded, they encountered a lame man who had been crippled from the time of his birth and who was brought daily to the “Beautiful Gate” of the temple to beg alms of those who passed by (v. 2). He asked for a donation from the apostles, and Peter responded by telling the man to give him their attention—which he did, because he inferred that they were about to give him some money (vv. 3–5). Peter then responded by performing the miracle of healing recorded in verses 6–7 quoted above.

Upon realizing that he actually could walk, he not only began walking, but jumping about and praising God as he followed the apostles into the temple (v. 8). His behavior attracted much attention, and the realization among the people that this was the lame beggar they had seen daily caused great amazement (vv. 9–10). These events drew a large crowd together in the area of “Solomon’s Porch,” which Peter used as an opportunity to preach a powerful Gospel sermon (vv. 11–26).

Since the account of action under consideration is one that involves the exercise of miraculous powers, we must examine the Bible's **remote context** for information on this phenomenon. God gave various men such powers in the ancient times (e.g., Moses, Elijah, Elisha, et al.). Jesus' miraculous powers caused His fame to be greatly broadcast. He gave the apostles miraculous abilities at the time He appointed them (Matthew 10:8, 19–20). These men (and only they) had the power to lay their hands on others and impart miraculous abilities (Acts 6:5–8; 8:5–18; 19:6; Rom. 1:11).

The basic purpose of these gifts was to confirm the revelation of His will that God was giving to inspired men (Mark 16:20; Heb. 2:3–4).<sup>5</sup> (The healing of the lame man at the Beautiful gate is a demonstration of this purpose of miracles in the New Testament. In this case, the confirmation actually **preceded** the preached message—the people heard [and apparently believed] the message on the strength on the miracle that had already occurred.)

The duration of these gifts is tied to the revelation of God's Word, since their purpose was to confirm the Word as it was being revealed and spoken. The confirmation that took place **as the revelation was being given** is a part of the written revelation itself, as John stated:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (20:30–31, emph. DM).

Therefore, it is not only true that “the faith...was once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3), but the **confirmation** of the faith was “once for all delivered” as well.

Thus when the revelation was completed and preserved in writing for all time, not only did the **need** for continued miraculous confirmation cease, but both the **means** of revelation (the gift of prophecy) and the **means** of confirmation (the other eight gifts [1 Cori 12:8–10]) would both cease simultaneously. As indicated earlier, Paul clearly declared that this would occur, as it has occurred (1 Cor. 13:8–12; Eph. 4:11–14). Not only did the **need** for the gifts disappear with the completion of God’s revelation (Jude 3), but the **means** of transmission of the gifts (i.e., the laying on of the apostles’ hands) disappeared with the death of the last apostle. It is surely beyond mere coincidence that both the completion of the revelation and the death of the last apostle (John) occurred practically simultaneously (i.e., at the close of the first century of the Gospel age). Therefore, when the last saint died to whom an apostle had imparted a spiritual gift, miraculous powers died with him for all time.

We must **deduce** from the foregoing information that the example of Peter’s telling this lame man to rise and walk was an account of a **temporary** action, because the working of miracles has long since ceased. However, it was an **obligatory** action for Peter, because the Holy Spirit gave these gifts to the apostles (and to others) that they might use them to confirm the message that He was revealing to them. While it was **obligatory** for **them** thus to use these gifts, it is **not obligatory** for **us** to do so because we live past the age of both their need and their availability. In fact, it is not even **optional** for us to attempt to do what Peter did. All who claim to have such powers today are false teachers and deceivers. It is therefore **sinful** for anyone to claim he has the **option**, much less the **obligation**, to imitate the account of Peter’s action recorded

in Acts 3:6–7. All of the accounts of miraculous activity in the Bible are thus correctly classified, as is this one—actions that are **obligatory** and **temporary**.

### ***Obligatory and Permanent Actions***

Actions in this classification of accounts of actions were obligatory for first-century brethren, and they are obligatory for us today. Hence, all who have lived since Jesus' death on the cross sin when they fail to emulate the New Testament accounts of action in this category. Acts 20:7 illustrates this classification of action, which **account of the action** states:

And upon the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul discoursed with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and prolonged his speech until midnight.

Luke here gives us the record of a group of brethren who assembled on the first day of the week, and with the stated purpose: “to break bread.” While they were assembled, Paul addressed them (“preached to them,” KJV) until midnight, with the intent to go on his way the next day.

The **immediate context** reveals that Paul had been traveling in Macedonia and Greece and was making his way back through Macedonia on his way to Syria (Acts 20:1–3). Seven brethren from various congregations in Greece, Macedonia, and Asia (Minor) went before him and waited for him at Troas (vv. 4–5). After the time of the Passover, Paul (and Luke) departed by ship from Philippi and arrived in Troas five days later; they stayed there a week (v. 6) before the account of action stated in verse seven occurred.

They were assembled in a well-lit, third-story room, from which Eutychus—having fallen asleep during Paul's long sermon—fell and died (vv. 8–9). Paul

resurrected him, and they went back upstairs where the bread was broken and eaten<sup>6</sup> and where Paul conversed with them until daybreak before departing (vv. 10–11). Luke and the seven other brethren then sailed ahead, while Paul chose to go by land, rejoining them at the port town of Assos, from which they all sailed together, arriving eventually at Miletus (vv. 12–15). Though Paul desired to visit with the elders at Ephesus nearby (which he did, vv. 17–36), they bypassed the city itself to save time and to allow Paul to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost, if possible (v. 16).

The **remote context** provides details both about **what** they observed (i.e., “to break bread”) and **when** they observed it (i.e., “the first day of the week”). The background of this breaking of bread is found in the last Passover feast the Lord observed with His apostles (Mat. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:19–20, 29–30; 1 Cor. 11:23–25). On that occasion the Lord instituted the Lord’s supper (v. 20), which the Scriptures also designate as the “communion” (10:16), the “Lord’s table” (Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 10:21), and (as in Acts 20:7), “breaking of bread” (2:42) (see fuller comments on this designation below).

These passages indicate that this observance involved eating unleavened bread and drinking fruit of the vine (i.e., grape juice). This eating and drinking at the “Lord’s table” was to be observed in the kingdom—the church—of Christ (Luke 22:29–30). The purpose of the Lord’s supper is to serve as a memorial—a reminder—to its participants of the **death**<sup>7</sup> of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:26), and doubtless of the efficacy thereof for their salvation from sin.

A reference to “breaking bread” is found only a few times in the New Testament, and in each case it refers to eating some physical element(s) of food. Twice *breaking of*

*bread* (or a like expression) appears in settings of spiritual or religious activities (Acts 2:42; 20:7; cf. v. 11). Since the only “breaking of bread” related to New Testament worship occurs in the Lord’s supper; we conclude that this expression so indicates in the two settings mentioned above. Hence, Acts 2:42 indicates that the church observed this memorial from its very beginning.

But why is only the bread mentioned in this term if it is intended to refer to the Lord’s supper? *To break bread* in Acts 2:42 and 20:7 is simply a figure of speech (synecdoche) in which one element of a whole (the bread and the fruit of the vine constitute the whole) is employed to include the whole. The same figure is found in John 3:16 where *whosoever believeth* is a synecdoche for all of man’s required response to the sacrifice of Christ (i.e., confession of faith, repentance, baptism, faithfulness).

When Jesus instituted the supper, He indicated not only its elements (bread and fruit of the vine), but also its purpose (a memorial) and the sphere in which it was to be observed (His kingdom, the church). However, He did not tell us the time or the interval of its observance. Herein lies the great significance of Acts 20:7, which names the day of its observance: “the first day of the week.” That this day was not arbitrarily chosen is obvious from the following:

1. Paul was hastening on his way to arrive at Jerusalem by Pentecost (v. 16), and he left immediately after the assembly in which they broke the bread (vv., 7, 11).
2. Paul and Luke arrived a full week before this assembly took place (v. 6). This bread-breaking was therefore no ordinary “fellowship meal” that could be eaten on a day of their choosing. Had it been, Paul would doubtless have insisted that they eat it the day after his arrival, allowing him to hasten on his way a week sooner. (Note: The fact that this was **not** an ordinary meal serves as further evidence that this **was** the Lord’s supper.)

The foregoing information ties the Lord's supper to the first day of the week, and by implication, limits its observance to that day. However, the question of **which** first days of the week is still unanswered without further information.

The Lord's supper was apparently a significant purpose of the assemblies of the church in Corinth. It is mentioned no fewer than five times in connection with the church's worship assembly in a relatively short passage (1 Cor. 11:17–18, 20, 33–34).

Later, Paul tells us the day on which the Corinthian church assembled:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I gave order to the churches of Galatia, so also do ye. Upon the first day of the week let each one of you lay by him in store, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come (16:1–2).

Here is the same day Luke connected with the Lord's supper observance in Troas. Note that Paul did not here have to order them to meet on the first day of the week, because it was unnecessary to do so. They had surely been faithfully assembling on that day from the time he established the church there (Acts 18). He does order them to give of their money on the first day of the meetings. The Greek construction of *upon the first day of the week* is more fully translated *upon the first day of each/every week*, and some Bible versions (e.g., NASB) and Greek interlinears so render it. Hebrews 10:25 emphasizes the importance of these assemblies by exhorting: "Not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh."

How often did the Corinthians assemble?—The first day of every week. What explicitly stated two activities did they observe in said assemblies?—The Lord's supper and giving of their money (although the other worship practices of prayer, singing, and study of the Scriptures are elsewhere indicated). Since a basic purpose of their

assembling together was to observe the Lord's supper (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20), and they assembled every first day of the week, they therefore observed the Lord's supper every first day of the week. When God commanded the Jews through Moses, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8), it is inconceivable that any Jew ever asked, "Which sabbath day?" The Jews universally have understood that as often as there was a sabbath they were to observe it. We think there is as little reason to ask, "Which Lord's day should we observe the Lord's supper?"

The practice of the church regarding the Lord's supper, the contribution, and all other obligatory ordinances was not confined to one or a few congregations. We have noted the observance of the supper in Jerusalem, Troas, and Corinth by its being specifically mentioned. Further, Paul indicated that what he ordered the Corinthian church to do on the first day of the week regarding their giving, he ordered all of the Galatian churches to do (would he do any less regarding the Lord's supper?). Further, what Paul taught in one congregation, he taught in all:

For this cause have I sent unto you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, who shall put you in remembrance of my ways which are in Christ, even as I teach everywhere in every church (1 Cor. 4:17, emph. DM).

Concerning the duration of the observance of the Lord's supper, Jesus placed it in His church/kingdom (Luke 22:29–30) as a memorial to and proclamation of His death until He returns: "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death **till he come**" (1 Cor. 11:26, emph. DM). Thus, God's faithful people are to keep this memorial until the end of time.

We deduce from the foregoing information that the account of action found in Acts 20:7 was obligatory upon saints in the first century. Further, we deduce that it

illustrates an obligation that is permanent in its duration—lasting until the end of the world. Therefore, both Christians in the first century and we today are bound by the account of action recorded in Acts 20:7—to observe the Lord’s supper as we assemble for worship every Lord’s day. There are numerous other accounts of obligatory and permanent action in the New Testament, including Acts 2:42, 5:29, 8:35, 10:47–48. From such accounts of action we have been able to derive the pattern for the New Testament church.

### **Conclusion**

Only through the hermeneutical process we have consistently followed in this MS can we determine to whom and for how long any given Biblical statement applies. This applies both to declarative statements in words as well as to accounts of action. For sake of emphasis, we repeat the elements of this process:

1. Carefully examine the account itself
2. Carefully examine the immediate context
3. Carefully examine the remote context (i.e., all that the Bible says about the subject under consideration)
4. Deduce only the conclusions which said examinations warrant

### **Endnotes**

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1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
  2. I do not intend anything derogatory by use of the term *anti*; I use it only in an effort to identify certain ones in as few words as possible.
  3. For a fuller discussion of these classifications, see Thomas B. Warren, *When Is a Bible Example Binding?* (Colleyville, TX: National Christian Press, 2001 reprint), pp. 123–24.
  4. For a fuller discussion and for numerous additional illustrations of these respective classifications, see Warren, pp. 124–65.

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5. Albeit, note the exceptions to this strictly confirmatory purpose, as stated in 1 Corinthians 14:3–4: “But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men edification, and exhortation, and consolation. He that speaketh in a tongue edifieth himself; but he that prophesieth edifieth the church.”
  6. For a discussion of whether or not this “breaking of bread” was the Lord’s supper or a physical meal and if this meeting took place based upon Jewish or Roman time, see J.W. McGarvey, *A Commentary on Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1983 reprint), pp. 248–49. I agree with McGarvey’s conclusions.
  7. Note: Paul does not say that the Lord’s supper is in memory of “the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ” (as prayer leaders at the table so often say), but very specifically of His **death**. This fact is further seen in that the elements themselves (i.e., the bread and the fruit of the vine) are symbolic of the body and blood of our Lord (Mat. 26:26–28; 1 Cor. 11:23–27), respectively, which elements directly relate to His sacrifice for the sins of the world in His **death**. While the burial and the resurrection (particularly) of Christ are of surpassing significance, I have never found a Scriptural indication that they are the aim of the memorial instituted by Jesus.

**[Note:** I prepared this MS and delivered a digest of it at the Annual Permian Basin Lectures, April 23–25, 2004, conducted by the Eisenhower Church of Christ, Odessa, Texas. The MS was published in a book of the lectures, titled, *Some Questions About Authority*, ed. Jeff Sweeten.]