

## Conversations for Change

### *Article Two:*

#### *Giving the Conversation Stability*

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My wife's new hobby is photography. I love sitting around and looking at the pictures she takes mainly because most of them are photos of our kids. Each picture captures a story. Flipping through pictures allows one the opportunity of re-living a moment in the past. It can simultaneously revive emotions long forgotten. These stories captured in pictures make life seem fuller. But these revived emotions and memories are brought to life through the pictures only if you know the story. The story is the key. If you do not know the story behind the photo, you simply see a cute smiling kid.

The historical passages in the New Testament (NT) work the same way my wife's photos work.

There are certain passages in the Bible that capture a picture of what life was like in the first century for the first Christians. But that is all they are – snapshots. The historical passages in the NT are limited in what they can say since they only tell us about a moment in time in a specific situation in the first century. I am thinking most specifically of the book of Acts. The book of Acts is an historical account of the unfolding of the New Covenant (NC) era. The book contains absolutely reliable history, but it needs some commentary on what that history means. Unless my wife could be there to explain what was happening, what she was thinking, and what she was feeling when she snapped the photo, you would have a very limited understanding of the picture. So it is with us as we gaze into the picture of history painted by Luke in the book of Acts. It sure would be nice to ask him some questions so as to fill in the picture.

Acts chapter 2 has often been a “go-to” passage for many pastors as they seek to set-up their particular church model and structure. They want to be as true to the NT church model as possible. But have you ever wondered why we choose to follow some things done by the early church and not others? For example, let's look at a passage that many churches look to in order to structure their churches.

Acts 2:42-47 (ESV)

<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

<sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Why are we so committed to the Lord's Supper but not in going house-to-house and every day? A church that is committed to the text of Scripture might even see that they were breaking bread in their homes day by day and try to accomplish this by initiating house churches or cell groups. But why not ask all the church members to meet together every day? That is the example of the early church. That is how often they met together.

And furthermore, why not ask your church members to sell their houses, possessions and belongings so that we could distribute them equally among the poor? Why haven't most churches gone that far yet?

How are we to determine which examples are to be followed and which are to be relegated to history. We need a hermeneutic (a method of interpretation) for the historical passages in the NT. So, let's establish some guidelines for interpreting the book of Acts.

As with any book, we need to establish the genre of the Book of Acts. What kind of literature is it? What is the purpose of this kind of literature? For example, the poetical books make some amazing statements about worship. The rivers clap their hands and the hills sing songs (Ps. 98:8). We know not to take that literally because of the poetic genre and in this genre authors often make true statements in figurative language that is laden with rich imagery. The Book of Acts is not poetic literature. It is historical literature. The book of Acts tells us something that happened in history. But what is the purpose of historical literature? Is the purpose of historical literature to provide for us an example of how to live the Christian life or how to preach or how to function as a body of believers? No. For every example a congregation can find in the historical accounts of the church that might seem worthy of imitation, they can equally find a number that would be ludicrous to follow. A congregation might find selling houses and land in order to help the needs of the severely impoverished to be admirable and an example they want to follow. But it would be crazy and wrong for that same congregation to say that if you do not sell your houses, you will be punished. They would be mishandling Scripture badly if they said that if you don't give the full proceeds of the sale you will suffer the same fate as Ananias and Sapphira.

In Acts chapter one, Luke makes it quite clear that the book of Acts is historical literature. He reminds his audience, a man named Theophilus, that the document he holds in his hands is the second of two volumes. The first volume was the gospel account written by Luke (cf. Luke 1:1-4). The gospel account was intended to be a compilation of narratives that account for all the things accomplished by Jesus (Luke 1:1). It was an historical record. So whereas the first volume (the Gospel of Luke) could easily and descriptively be renamed "The Acts of Jesus," so now in his second volume Luke records all the acts of Jesus that are done by the Spirit of Christ through his apostles. In order to highlight the historical nature of the book, we could rename the book of Acts, "The Acts of Jesus done by the Spirit through His Apostles." This is recorded history. This is the recording of the events of the New Covenant era as it began to unfold.

As we read about what the early church did, many of us want to ask the question: Must we do what the early Apostles did simply because they did it that way? Perhaps we should ask the question differently: Is it sin if we do not follow the Apostle's example? If we do not meet every day and enjoy the Lord's Supper from house-to-house, are we sinning? The early church enjoyed the Lord's Supper in the form of a full meal. Are we sinning if we don't do it that way?

I think there is actually a clear answer to this question. The Bible is clear in passages like 1 John 3:4 that sin is breaking God's law. There is no sin if there is no law to break (Rom. 5:12-14). Examples from history are nothing more than the descriptions of one

way it was done. But they do not prescribe the way it must be done. They do not command us. They simply tell us what happened. Example is not law and therefore it is not binding on the believer.

We take the Lord's Supper seriously because Paul commanded it to be done in his letters to the church at Corinth. We must observe the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-34). But Paul nowhere prescribes the frequency or the format. He is simply silent. That means it is a matter of freedom for each congregation. If you want do it weekly, fine. If you want to do it monthly, fine. If you want a meal, great.

The epistles of the NT are the primary place we need to turn in order to be taught about the Christian life. And when we turn to the epistles of Paul, Peter and John, we learn very quickly that there are not a lot of commands that govern our gatherings. We must gather (Heb. 10:24-25). And the gathering needs to be frequent enough so as to accomplish true fellowship and wage effective warfare in light of the second coming. We must meet for the express purpose of encouragement (1 Cor. 14:26). But beyond that, the commands are rather sparse. Instead, we find the bulk of the NT teaching is on how to live the Christian life. And that brings us full circle to last week's paper, *Conversations for Change, Part 1*. The church of Jesus Christ is comprised of all those called by him and assembled into his body, the Church. The Church is made up of all believers everywhere. The primary purpose of believers gathering is so that they might sufficiently help one another in living the Christian life so that they persevere to the end.

Most of what we will do as a gathered part of Christ's body are choices that we are "free" to make.

Should we meet weekly? Freedom.

Should we meet on Sundays? Freedom.

Should we meet one or two services? Freedom.

Should we have Sunday School and corporate worship? Freedom.

Should we have offering plates or giving boxes? Freedom.

Should we call ourselves "Baptists"? Freedom.

Should we sing songs? Freedom.

Should we sing with certain and different styles? Freedom

Should we have monologue sermons? Freedom.

Should we have the Lord's Supper weekly? Freedom.

Should we meet at 10:30 or 9:30? Freedom.

Should we have home groups? Freedom.

Should we call our leaders elders or pastors? Freedom.

Should we offer childcare? Freedom.

Should we have buildings? Freedom.

Should we have offices and staff members? Freedom.

This amount of freedom means that we need to learn how to converse with each other. It means we need to learn how to trust the elders' leadership when we don't see them violating a command found in Scripture and as they prayerfully consider what path is the most prudent for our congregation's needs. It means we need to learn how to formulate opinions with wisdom and grace.

At the end of the day, there is no true church model in Scripture. There are only true believers called by God and placed as members in His Body. These believers gather together for mutual worship and edification.

In the next article we will begin the conversation about membership in the church.