

Why Church Standards?

Many years ago, I wrestled with this question. I distinctly remember asking an older bishop why we as a church have standards. I will never forget his answer, “We have church standards because we have found that if you want to have a plain church, you need to have a written discipline.” In other words, the ultimate goal he had for the church was that it remains plain and separated. His experience was we would not maintain that separation without a written standard.

That fueled my journey. Since my days in the public school in the South, I had been on a quest for a Biblical church fellowship. My friends all went to church (at least as far as I knew). We spent a lot of time discussing our church practices with each other. They were all intrigued that our church did not allow its members to own or use the television. And they knew of our Mennonite sisters, and that they dressed in long, simple, modest dresses. While they appreciated being able to look at a girl without having tempting thoughts, they thought our practices strange and quaint.

Their question was, “Where is it in the Bible that your church has the authority to make rules?” I never knew quite what to answer.

We had already covered the territory of what to do if our churches disagreed on an issue. In our first discussions, they would say, “Well, your church says to do it one way and our church says to do it in another way so really it doesn’t matter.” Finally, we had come to understand that there was authority greater than our churches’ traditions. The Bible had the last word. If one of us could show from the Bible that a certain practice was right or had a Bible basis, that settled it.

So that’s why when the senior bishop said, “...if you want to have a plain church you need to have a written discipline,” I knew it would not have convinced my high school friends. There needed to be a Biblical basis for the practice, or any other tradition would be just as valid as ours. I intensified my search for answers. Some of what I learned in putting pieces together came simply from studying Old Testament passages, like the first one given here from the book of Nehemiah.

1. The main reason for a church to have standards is because the New Testament teaches this practice.

In Nehemiah's day, devout Jews bound themselves together in covenant and began to work out agreements on how to apply the teachings of the Law in a practical way. This is the beginning of the Pharisee movement.

Two things happened to Jewish religious life through the captivity and return.

The one was Jews in captivity formed regular places and times for worship in what came to be known as synagogue life. They understood they had direction from God to do this in the fact that their temple had been destroyed, they had been scattered to foreign lands, and Ezekiel had given them direction on this. In our translation, we may pass over what the Jews took as direction for their religious survival. Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they shall come (Eze 11:16). Synagogue life did not center around sacrificial rites as the temple did, but around study and exposition of the Torah. Neither did the Priests and Levites have any priority in synagogues, but the congregation organized themselves, giving leadership roles to Rabbis and Cantors who had good understanding and commitment to the Torah, and personal ability.

The second was the concept of forming groups of "separated ones." When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he found the people living in violation to the Law. This grieved him deeply because Nehemiah understood the Israelites had been carried into captivity for breaking God's laws (Neh 9:26-38). Nehemiah called for a group who would identify with the commandments of God. "And because of all this, we make a sure covenant, and write it; and our princes, Levites, and priests, seal unto it" (Neh 9:38).

This group is identified by four essential ingredients:

Their movement was a revival movement that grew out of focus on the written Word of God (Neh 8:1- 9:38). Nehemiah had Ezra read the law distinctly to make sure everyone understood what God was asking from them. They then worshipped God and repented of their sins.

Understanding the Word caused them to separate themselves from the mixed inhabitants of the land (Neh 9:2). The word separated becomes the hallmark of their movement.

The persons who were interested entered into a voluntary covenant. (Neh 9:38). This was not by force nor by coercion but by personal choice.

These persons then made ordinances, or binding resolutions for themselves as to how they would put the principles of the law into practice (Neh 10:32).

Some commandments are so practical they did not need to work out a way to apply them, they just needed to be obedient. (Their efforts to rid themselves of strange wives is recorded in this larger context). Other items, like the upkeep of temple rituals, fell into a

different category. The earlier tithing method was not working, so the devout began the practice of binding and loosing, practical ways to apply God's laws.

Also we made ordinances for us, to charge ourselves yearly with the third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God; For the shewbread, and for the continual meat offering, and for the continual burnt offering, of the sabbaths, of the new moons, for the set feasts, and for the holy things, and for the sin offerings to make an atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God (Neh 10:32-33). This "making ordinances (mitzvah)" was the beginning of the "parush or parushi" – separated ones" and became what was known as the Pharisee movement in the days of Christ and the Apostles.

By Jesus' day, we witness leaders of the synagogue having the authority to "cast out" (what we could call "excommunicate") those who did not conform to their expectations. You will remember this happened to the blind man spoken of in John 9:34 because of his belief in Jesus.

Jesus used the terminology of the Pharisees to describe how the church would relate to principles that called for a practical application in the changing cultures of the church. *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matt 16:18-19).* The "bind" and "loose" were straight from the Pharisee's vocabulary for their rules. A more in-depth study of this verse leads many to understand it to say that the church may bind what is already bound in heaven. This practice of "binding and loosing" comes to us in three forms in the New Testament church. They are "decrees," "rules," and "traditions." We will take a brief look at each.

The other synagogue practice of binding and loosing individuals also becomes a part of the Christian church with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18. Here an offensive brother should be spoken to, but if he becomes obstinate in his denial of his offenses, then he is to be considered as "a heathen man and a publican." Jesus plainly patterned the church after the structure of the synagogue, howbeit with a totally new message at its core – the Gospel of Christ replaces the Torah.

The early church understood their responsibility to speak to cultural issues and make binding decisions for the peace and unity of the church (Decrees for to Keep) (Acts 15:1-31). *And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith and increased in number daily (Acts 16:4-5).* The issues the disciples spoke to were cultural issues, but they reached from the Christian church headquarters at Jerusalem to all the churches at that time. They did not need to rule on adultery, nor witchcraft. They did not speak to keeping communion nor foot washing. These things were made clear to the apostles, and the entire church had a position on these issues. The matters addressed in the "decrees for to keep" were

cultural issues and may be right or wrong depending upon cultural situations. (The matter of fornication no doubt dealt with the intermarriage of Jew and Gentile since the Jews had developed staunch convictions on this in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah). In other days all these things may be done without violating God's commands. Today we have firm convictions on issues such as slavery or drinking strong drink or other observances which it is clear were not issues in the apostles' day.

The early church was enjoined to seek perfection in church life by walking by the same rule and minding the same thing. *Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing* (Php 3:16). The word translated "rule" here is from the Greek word Kanon (reed or measuring stick). We get our English word "canon" from this word, but Strong's includes as a definition, "a statement of faith and practice." The congregation at Philippi had worked things out as for their faith and practice. Someone seeking to be perfect was enjoined to walk in step with the rest.

The early church also had "traditions," which were a unified approach to cultural challenges. Church members were disciplined if they violated these traditions. *Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle... Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us* (2Th 2:16, 3:6). The consequence for those who did not comply with these "traditions" was that they were brought under the discipline of the church. In the setting of the church at Thessalonica, the pressure from the culture in that day was to be lazy and not work to provide for oneself. The church took a position against that.

The early church ordained elders who were responsible to keep order in the churches. *And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves. Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men* (1Th 5:12-14). *Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation... Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you* (Heb 13:7,17). The goal of the Christian church is to make it possible for souls to live a standard of holiness and obedience that qualifies them to eventually enter heaven.

Obviously, church authority can be abused. When there is church discipline that does not relate to holiness of life but is merely about maintaining control over members, then the leaders themselves will come under God's judgment. Consider this example of abuse of church authority from the early church. *I wrote unto the church: but Diotrefes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth*

them that would, and casteth them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God (3 Jo 1:9-11).

2. Another reason we have church standards is because the Christian faith is about holiness of life, not empty professions of faith.

The Bible is written in proper balance to meet the need of every culture, in every age. The pressure of the early church to return to Judaism is different from the pressure we face today to succumb to lawlessness. In our day, around the world, Christianity is identified with Western culture and the decadence associated with it. The Bible warns us about this day. *For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 1:4).* This plainly teaches us that some so-called Christians will twist the meaning of God's grace to give an excuse for men to live in known sins, (even sins unto death) and claim assurance of salvation. While not every church draws the line for their membership at the exact same place, the goal for church authority is not control, but a practical expression of holiness.

3. The final reason we will give is the world needs a unified expression of holiness, not more of every man doing that which is right in his own eyes.

Consider the following verses, *For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving (Col 2:5-7). Prove all things; hold fast that which is good (1 Th 5:21). Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us (2 Ti 1:13-14).*

A final appeal: Can we keep our standards Biblical and attractive?

Every church that makes a church standard faces common questions such as, What is our response when cultural norms change?

How do we respond when new threats (such as changes from technology) come?
How do we convince a new generation to embrace the values that we hold dear?
How can we keep church standards that the world clearly recognizes as being an expression of Biblical obedience?

It is clear we will need to submit one to another in the fear of God. No one person or generation will have a perfect understanding of how to relate to long-held traditions or how to face the new threats that arise from our age of technology. But we need each other. We need to embrace our differences and truly hearken to each other. When we

have agreed to a standard, let us not cheat on our commitment. We can submit to and live out the convictions of others, and it will not harm us.

It is also clear we need a firm anchor in knowledge of the Word of God. God has not given us the spirit of fear. We have the Spirit of Power, of Love and of a Sound Mind. Let us study the Word, agree to live it out with respect to our heritage, and then find our way together.

Truly we face the challenge of making practical applications of the Bible that confront our carnal nature, honor our Lord Jesus and give a consistent testimony to the world around us. Our Lord Jesus is coming soon, and we want to be a part of His spotless Bride when He returns.

~Steve Ebersole