

Pragmatism

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How the Early Church Grew
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Our Scripture text is taken from Acts 16, beginning at verse one, and you'll find that in the Pew Bibles on page 1720, beginning at Acts 16, beginning at verse one.

He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. 2 The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4 As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers. (Acts 16:1–5)

The word of the Lord. ["Thanks be to God."]

May we pray.

Heavenly Father, please help me in a gracious, gentle, kind, and loving, and tender way to lay forth what your word says in a way that is profitable and brings changes to our thinking and our acting. For the sake of the Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.

The Controversy: Do You Have to Become Jews in order to Become Christians?

Hold your hand there, because we're going to come back in a moment, and turn with me, if you would, to the fifth chapter of Galatians. Galatians chapter 5, and this is on page 1815 in those Bibles, and it's entitled there, "Freedom in Christ." Look at Galatians 5:1:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Look at verse 2:

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. 3 Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. 4 You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5 But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:2-6)

Now, notice something here. And I'm not going to preach on circumcision today. I am going to preach on it, I believe, next Lord's Day because this is a two-part sermon. It's part of a bigger series about "How the Early Church Grew."

And we saw last week that the early church grew not by sending off people to schools thousands of miles or hundreds of miles away, but by training them, taking a person with an aptitude, and apprenticing that aptitude, that person, to someone else who trained him in action. And I set forth that the seminary fetish of the Presbyterian churches is the reason that the Presbyterian churches lost the frontier.

As we will travel, God willing, this next week from here to San Antonio, San Antonio to Laredo, from Laredo to Mercedes, to San Benito, to Brownsville, to Edna, and coming back up through Mexia. We will see a lot of the country with Sandy driving. Please remember her in your prayers, and that I will not make comments, and keep myself focused on studying, which is always good, because Sandy is an excellent driver.

But one thing I notice as I travel through Texas, where are the Presbyterians? Where are the Presbyterians? We see Methodists. We see Baptists, we see Assemblies of God, and Pentecostals, and others, but where are the Presbyterians? We lost the frontier. And we lost the frontier because we had a fetish for an educated ministry.

Now, I want to say, I believe in an educated ministry. I believe it's important that those who stand and proclaim God's Word to you have studied the Scriptures and are competent to proclaim His Word. But I'm saying there's a better way to accomplish it than how the Presbyterians did it. And so that sermon was critical of my own denomination. I'm a Presbyterian. And this sermon will be in some respects as well. Because what I want you to see is this, that we can take something that is an accident of history.

Let me clarify what I mean by an accident of history. There are no accidents. Not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from the will of our Father. The reason the President of the United States did not get hit in the skull yesterday is because it was not God's will that he die.

As we travel for 2,000 miles between now and next Lord's Day, That's our confidence. Nothing can hurt us. I'm persuaded of that. And that all things work together for good to those who love God. So, when I say an accident of history, there are no accidents. I simply mean an incidental. Something that took place in history that is part of why we are the way we are.

Our History Colors how we Understand Scripture.

It's important that we remember this, that events in history color how we are and act today. And if you go back to the history of the Presbyterians, going back to the 1500s, you discover that there was great religious foment in Europe, and that includes the British Isles. After Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the cathedral church in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31st, 1517, that led to a lot of changes. People began to modify things.

You see what happened is that when the Roman Empire in the east fell in A.D. 476, the Bishop of Rome took the place of the Roman Emperor. He even took the title of the Roman Emperor, *Pontifex Maximus*.

So, the Bishop of Rome became the Roman Emperor in the West, whereas in the East, the Roman Emperor continued on in power with his subjects subject to him until A.D. 1453, when the forces of Islam conquered Constantinople.

Now that little piece of history is just this. Presbyterians were persecuted because they wanted to worship God according to Scripture. And Presbyterians believed that **it was a sin for churches to require them to do that which the Bible did not require them to do**. Now let's get that point across. Presbyterians came to believe that it was a sin for the church to require them to do that which the Bible did not command them to do.

Notice I said the church. There are things that the government can require of you that the church cannot. The government can require of you all manner of things, but unless the government commands you to sin, you have an obligation to obey the government. We're talking about civil government. That's why we pay taxes and why we observe speed limit signs pretty well. And the government can require of you absolutely anything except that which requires you to sin (Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Acts 4:10-21; 5:28-29, 40-42). Now here's the point of the sermon today.

The church cannot require you to do anything that is not explicitly set forth in Scripture. That's the key point. So, what you have in the British Isles is a kind of a revolution that begins under King Henry VIII and continues under his son Edward. Under King Henry VIII, the Archbishop of Canterbury wrote *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion*. They're the standard of the Episcopal churches throughout the world. Under Henry's son, they were expanded to 42 articles which were explicitly Calvinistic.

Then came along Henry's daughter after her half-brother died. We call her in history "Bloody Mary." Why was she called that? She was called that because she put to death so many people, including the author of the 39 articles and the author of the *Forty-two Articles of Religion*, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer.

And Cranmer, at one point, is being burned at the stake. He had signed under torture and had recanted what he had written. And then his conscience ate him up because Thomas Cranmer was a man like Luther whose conscience was held captive to the word of God. And so, when they burned him at the

stake after he recanted his recantation, he held his right hand into the flames and said, “Let this guilty right hand be burned first.”

Well, in the mercy of God, in the extreme mercy of God, Mary died. And her half-sister Elizabeth came to power, who had a compromised church. The form of church government took on the form of the Eastern Church, that is the Byzantine Church, where the head of the state was over the churches. The form of worship was as Roman Catholic as she could possibly make it without destroying the worship of God. But its doctrine was essentially Calvinistic.

And then, of course, Elizabeth dies in 1603, and her distant cousin, not so distant, James VI of Scotland became James I of England. Out of that, things began to change.

The Scottish Reformation Resulted in Civil War.

Christians who had come to believe that the Bible alone tells us how to worship God and what we ought to do in the church began to be concerned because they were being forced under James I’s son, Charles I, to worship God in a way that bound their consciences, and the Reformation gets kicked off. If you attended our Monday lectures over the past couple of years, you remember the story.

There was a milkmaid by the name of Jenny Geddes. And in those days, they didn’t have seats and pews for people who were poor. The rich were shown favoritism. And so, Jenny was a milkmaid, and she carried her milking stool with her. And when the when the officiant in St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh began to read the Episcopal prayer book, she—it sounded so much like the Roman church to her, she picked up her milking stool and threw it at the man and said these words, “Varlet, wilt thou say Mass in my lug?” That’s what this is (pointing at my ear), a lug. And the stool hit a hornet’s nest, literally, which also ignited a hornet’s nest, metaphorically.

Now, that’s the background for what I’m saying.

The Presbyterians came up, eventually, with *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. And in there, in chapter 20, they talk about the way to worship God. And it says that the way to worship God is limited by the Scriptures. And so,

that's important, but what is really behind that? You have to look at the verses that they used to establish that doctrine, and we'll look at those in a couple of minutes.

The thing I want you to see here is this. When we compare what Paul did to Timothy in Acts 16 with what he said in Galatians 5, it's this. Paul was acting as a pragmatist when he circumcised Timothy. That's an important truth.

Why Do So Many Presbyterian Churches not Grow?

Why do many Reformed churches, why do many Presbyterian churches not grow? Because they are attempting in a very literalistic and narrow way to limit what we do in worship, which is very ineffective. In other words, what I'm going to advocate for you this morning with that lengthy historical introduction is this.

It is important that we are pragmatic in how we approach worship. Now what do I mean by that in light of the "Regulative Principle of Worship"?

The "Regulative Principle of Worship" means that what we do in worship is derived from Scripture and Scripture alone. But how we apply that needs to be pragmatic, following the principle, "What works?"

And I'm going to tell you. Sandy and the Nixes and I were in the largest Presbyterian church in North America a couple of weeks ago for our General Assembly. Why is it the largest Presbyterian church in North America? They're in our denomination. They way that they worship is not governed strictly by this, that, or the other thing. And well, "We didn't see that in the Bible." So, they have lights. They have overheads. We have overheads that show you the tune numbers. Their style of worship is radically different than ours.

Am I saying that theirs is right and ours is wrong? No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.

I'm simply saying that if we don't adapt to the times in which we live in terms of what appeals to people to draw them in and to get them in and to establish them in the faith, we will continue to be in decline. And Texas will soon have no Presbyterian churches if we are not somewhat pragmatic.

This is my point about Paul. He said in Galatians that if you're circumcised, Christ won't profit you at all (Galatians 5:2-12). Yet he went and circumcised Timothy. What do we read in Acts 16?

Turning back there, and verse 3, Acts 16, 3, page 1720:

Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. (Acts 16:3)

What do you call that? "Paul went against his own theology," you say. No, he didn't. This was not a matter of salvation. This was a matter of practicality. This was about being effective in the ministry. He circumcised Timothy because he saw in Timothy an aptitude to share the gospel, to teach from God's Word.

Paul's Approach Was Pragmatic.

And I want you to turn with me, if you would, over to 1 Corinthians 9, page 1781. And let's look at verse 19.

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (1 Corinthians 9:19)

We're going to see how he fleshes that out in a moment. The point I want to make is this. As you read this, you understand why Paul circumcised an uncircumcised man whose father was an unbelieving pagan Greek but whose mother was a believing Jewish woman.

Why did he do it? It was practicality. It was about doing something that would make Timothy effective and knowing that Timothy would not be effective without being circumcised. Look at what Paul says there, 1 Corinthians 9 and verse 19.

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (1 Corinthians 9:19)

What is Christian freedom? Christian freedom is the freedom to be a slave to everyone in order to reach them with the gospel. Let me say that again.

Christian freedom is being a slave to everyone in order to win them with the gospel. Look here what he says, verse 20:

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

Did Paul ever eat a ham sandwich? I have no idea. But I can tell you this, he wouldn't show up at a Jewish home with ham sandwich on his breath. Think on that and may the Lord show you what that really means.

To the Jews, I became like a Jew to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became like one under the law, though I myself am not under the law, so as to win those under the law. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

What is he doing? Is he a hypocrite? Would he have a Trump hat one day and a Biden hat the next and a Bobby Kennedy hat the next? Well, yeah. Are you kidding me? No, this is what I mean.

Whether Donald Trump wins, whether Joe Biden wins, whether Bobby Kennedy wins, in the ultimate meaning of the world, it doesn't really amount to a whole lot.

What amounts to a whole lot is, where will people spend eternity? And if people identify me with Donald Trump and that causes them to reject what I say, then I don't want to be identified with Donald Trump. If people identify me with Joe Biden and that causes them to not hear what I have to say, then I don't want to be identified with Joe Biden. If people identify me with Bobby Kennedy, and that causes them not to listen to me, I don't want to be identified with Bobby Kennedy.

Why? "Because crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane, but the church of Jesus constant will remain."

Can you imagine the Lord Jesus Christ campaigning for a political candidate? "I support Herod over Pontius Pilate." Can you imagine that?

Can you imagine the Apostle Paul campaigning, "I support Nero over Claudius." Can you imagine that? The point I'm making is this, I have to realize that I, as a Christian man, much more as a Christian pastor, am called

to be a slave. I have no right to support Donald Trump. I have no right to support Joe Biden. I have no right to support Bobby Kennedy, Jr., if that hinders the gospel.

Do I sometimes sit with people who are radically committed to Mr. Trump and nod my head in a “Connie Chung” way as she was interviewing Newt Gingrich’s mother many years ago?

Do I nod my head as if I’m agreeing with them? Sure.

Do I sit with people who support Joe Biden for president and nod my head sometimes as if I’m agreeing with them? Sure.

Do I sit with people sometimes who are supporting Bobby Kennedy and act as if I’m supporting him?

You say, “Bob, that’s just pure hypocrisy.” No, it isn’t. It isn’t. It’s what matters most. What is the core value? The core value is Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2) and making sure that I have people’s ears so they can hear the gospel, because in the final analysis, all three of those men are likely to end up in a Christless eternity. And that’s a great burden to me.

And in the final analysis, people who are fanatically pro-Trump or fanatically pro-Biden or fanatically pro-Bobby Kennedy Jr., most of those people, their hope is only in this life. And afterwards, there is the yawning, gaping mouth of hell into which every single human being will fall unless that person has repented of his sins and cast himself on God’s mercy in Christ.

What matters most? Paul had a doctrine that was rooted clearly in: To be a Christian means that you do **not have to become Jewish first** in order to be a Christian.

That’s what the theme of much of the New Testament is about. That was the argument: “Well, we’re okay with Gentiles becoming part of the church, but they’ve got to become Jews first.”

And the way that a person became a Jew was to be circumcised. As I say, we’ll look at that later on, God willing, next week. The point is that Paul is saying doctrinally, if you’re looking to be a Jew in order to become a

Christian, you don't really know Christ, because Christ is our circumcision. Christ is our baptism. Christ is everything. He's our Passover lamb (Colossians 2:10-12; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

So, what matters most is that men and women and boys and girls know the Lord Jesus Christ. And to that end, St. Paul was a pragmatist, reading on in 1 Corinthians 9. He said in verse 21:

To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) (noticing the next clause), **so as to win those not having the law.** (1 Corinthians 9:21)

Verse 22, page 1782.

To the weak I became weak, to win the weak (And notice this next sentence). I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Corinthians 9:22)

Dearly beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ, may that be true for all of us here at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Texarkana. May we be known for our yard signs that say "Jesus," and not for our yard signs promoting a politician.

Am I saying that if you have a yard sign promoting a politician, you're in sin? No, I'm not saying that. Am I saying that if you tell people you're going to vote for a particular candidate, you're in sin?

No, I'm not saying that.

What Do We Want to Be Known for?

I'm saying that we need to major on the majors, and the major thing is the Lord Jesus Christ, so that when people think of Sandy, they don't think of her as a Republican, or a Democrat, or an Independent, or a Libertine, I mean, excuse me, a Libertarian, they think of her as a Christian woman.

And that's what we've striven to do in our neighborhood. We practice evangelism in a very low-key way in our neighborhood. We walk. When we see people in their yards, we will very often walk over to them. And you know what our approach is? Almost always. "How can we pray for you?"

And you know what? Only a handful of people in our lives have ever said, “I don’t want you to pray for me.” I’ve had a few, but only a few. Almost everybody is willing to have prayer. And when we pray for people, people experience something.

What do they experience? I’ll tell you what it is. They experience that we’re talking to God on our metaphorical telephones as if there’s somebody on the other end of the line.

You hear what I just said? When we pray, we believe that God is listening to our prayers and is going to answer those prayers. We believe that. And people sense that when we pray for them.

“These people actually believe they’re talking to God.” And most people we pray for are touched. And so, we have this reputation, as the lady who used to cut our hair before she inherited her grandson to raise, said one day, said, “People have asked me, you know that old couple that walks?” And she said, “They’re not an old couple, that’s Bob and Sandy.”

The point is that we’re known for sharing Jesus with people. And whether they’re Republicans or Democrats, whether they have a Confederate flag or they’re African American, it makes no difference.

We love our neighbors, and they sense that we love them. Amazing things.

I remember the day we were walking and suddenly this lady comes running out of her house with her baby who was strangling, and they hollered, and her son noticed us out there and said, “Mama, that’s the doctor.”

And he wasn’t talking about “Doctor Who.”

They came running out because in his mind I was a doctor. I don’t know why he thought that. But anyhow, so she’s desperate, and we began to pray. And do you know that our post lady was driving by—her name is Tarsha, and she made a U-turn when she saw we were gathering, and she rolled her window down and began to pray with us.

So, there we were with an African American post lady. We were there with this lady and her children, including the little baby, who she has upside down, and Sandy got that right out of that baby's mouth...

Because one time I was preaching in New York and a child had slipped our firstborn daughter, Lydia, a mint during church. And suddenly Sandy screams out—do you know—and thank the Lord they didn't have all that paraphernalia on the communion table. I leapt over the communion table ran down the aisle, and we got that out.

Sandy knows how to get a mint out of a child's mouth. Now, I'm just saying this. What are we known for? We're known for Jesus Christ. And what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 9:

I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (1 Corinthians 9:22-23)

I want you to think about that for just a moment. Do you have a right to prescribe how we worship? No.

Do you have a right to hold on to your particular style of worship or songs? No.

You know what? I worship God in lots of different churches. I worship God in Black Baptist churches. I worship God in Pentecostal churches. I worship God in Episcopal churches. I even worship God inside Roman Catholic churches.

And you know, wherever I go to worship, I can worship God because I don't get hung up on peripheral things, I get hung up on the one matter: "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

So, I want to be—people ask, "What kind of Reformed person are you?" I'm pragmatically Reformed because pragmatism means doing that which works and not hold on to something that, well, that's the way granddaddy did it.

You know, when I used to preach during my college days in Presbyterian churches in the 1960s, I discovered one thing. I'd be preaching at this church

at 9:30 for their service, and then I would be preaching at another church at 11 o'clock for their service, and it was only 15 miles away. Why?

Why all these little Presbyterian churches? Now, that's South Carolina. That's not Texas where you'd be driving 200 miles to the next Presbyterian church. Why? You know why?

Granddaddy ruled the church from the grave. They had a cemetery. Well, we can't close down and merge with them over there because if we merge with them over there, who's going to take care of granddaddy in the graveyard? Am I joking?

No, I'm not joking. In other words, two churches were dying because they were ruled by the dead. What is Christ calling us to be and do as a church? To be a welcoming church, where whoever walks in these doors is always welcome.

I will never forget when I was a pastor in Wichita, Kansas, in Park City, where the BTK killer lived. He was my neighbor without my knowing it. We only had walk-in visitors one time in the two years I was there.

Now, that denomination, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, prided itself, notice what I said, **prided** itself on following the "Regulative Principle of Worship." So, if it's not commanded, you can't do it. And they misread it, as we'll explore this aspect of it next week. And not circumcision, that'll be in two weeks.

The point I want to make is this, in a denomination that prided itself on being strictly biblical: We don't have musical instruments, and we only sing from the book of Psalms.

You know why the Churches of Christ don't have musical instruments? Because they were founded by a Reformed Presbyterian who came from that tradition of not having musical instruments. The point is they didn't have musical instruments, and they only sang from the book of Psalms.

Yet, on the one and only Sunday in two years—even though we knocked on doors, even though we left literature, we never had visitors off the street—but one Sunday. And that church, required me to read certain things. So, I was baptizing a person on a Sunday morning, and I had to say these words.

“Do you believe that public covenanting is an ordinance of God for churches and nations, and that the Covenant of 1871 is binding on our church?”

Well, does that sound weird to you? It did sound weird. And so, they were there, there was a family, I believe there were about six people in that family, and at the end of the service, after I’d done the baptism and required them to affirm, “Do you believe that public covenanting is an ordinance of God for churches and nations, and that the Covenant of 1871 is binding on our church?” We sang a psalm. And then we had prayer. And I close my eyes when I pray, most of the time. And when I opened my eyes to give the benediction, where were they?

They were gone like a covey of quail with David Majors and his shotgun. I’m telling you: they were gone. When I walked out the back door of the church, I couldn’t see. I’m sure what they said was:

“Man, we walked into a cult today. Who in the world ever heard of the Covenant of 1871? They must be some weirdo cult.”

All I’m saying is this, irrelevance, that’s rooted in the Solemn League and Covenant in the 1600s in Scotland.

What we must be as a church is a relevant church, not to compromise what the Bible says, but in how we apply the Bible today, we must be flexible.

We must be flexible. Does that mean that it would be okay to have a drum set up here? Yeah. Yeah. How can you be against that? I mean, after all, you read through the Old Testament and the Psalms and “Praise him with cymbals, Praise him with the tambourine” (Psalm 150:5, 4) and all of that.

Would it be wrong for the ladies of the church to have tambourines and during the time of the offering to come marching down the aisle with their tambourines doing this (Psalm 150:4; Exodus 15:20-21)?

“I couldn’t stand that.”

Well, then you need to die to that. You need to die to that. I’m not saying that’s what we do.

Sandy, don't bring a tambourine.

I'm not saying that's what we need to do, but what I am saying is, we've got to become flexible. We need to become welcoming, and we need to understand what it is to welcome people from other cultures and other ethnicities, because where we live now—most people who live around here don't look like you and me.

We've got to learn how to reach those people and bring them into this church and make them feel welcome and warm and that they're of value to us. Because you know what the alternative is?

I've got to tell you: you all don't have a cemetery. Instead, this church will be the cemetery. You want to die, or do you want to reach others? What matters most?

Was Paul willing to circumcise Timothy in order to reach people with the gospel that would never be able to be reached had Timothy not been circumcised? And the answer to that is, that's why he did it. It's called pragmatism.

What matters is what works as far as it is keeping with the general principles laid out in the Word of God that we'll look at more closely, God willing, 2,000 miles from now, later, next Lord's Day.

May we pray.

Lord, I pray you would help us to come to grips with the importance of holding to the Bible as the sole standard of truth and learning how to adapt that, not to our personal tastes and preferences, but Lord, to adapt that so that we can reach our community with the gospel. with people who live within a mile of this church, three miles of this church, five miles of this church. May we be a warm and welcoming church, Lord, because we come to grips with one fundamental truth, that unless a person has repented of his sins and cast himself on your mercy in Jesus Christ, that person cannot go to heaven. Lord, help us, we pray. For Jesus' sake, amen.