

# WHEN IS AN EXAMPLE BINDING?

(by George Battey)

## Preview of the Argument

This article presents the argument that there is a clear distinction between a simple “account of action” and an “example.” These are not the same thing. Seven criteria will be presented which must be met before an account of action may be classified as a true example. These criteria are simple enough for even the most humble disciple to understand and apply without any resultant confusion. Once an example has been located and identified, it will be seen to be binding upon disciples today because of the very nature of what constitutes an example.

## THE NEED FOR THIS PRESENT STUDY

At the 2005 Preachers’ Study in Arlington, TX, one preacher taught “an example is never binding.” This caused a great stir. Many disagreed and opposed this teaching. Later, the same preacher who taught “an example is never binding,” wrote the following:

Actually the reason I emphasized in my presentation that it is the command that is obligatory and not the example itself, was to focus our attention on properly understanding the relationship between the command and the example. In the past we have not carefully clarified this relationship and this lack of clarification and *resultant confusion* has led people to lose confidence in examples. My purpose is to reestablish that confidence by clarifying this relationship. (Emphasis mine – GFB).

Notice the words “resultant confusion.” The picture being painted is that mass confusion and bewilderment exists concerning examples and when they are binding. Where this confusion exists is not mentioned. One thing is certain, many Bible subjects become confusing when people refuse to submit to Bible authority. For example, homosexuals say the Bible is “confusing” about homosexual activity, but it is only confusing to homosexuals and their sympathizers. Feminists say the Bible is “confusing” about female leadership in the church, but it is only confusing to feminists and their supporters. Likewise, many who think the subject of Bible examples is confusing are the same ones who find it difficult to submit to the authority inherent within Bible examples.

## **WHAT CONSTITUTES AN EXAMPLE?**

What is an example? An example is more than an account of action. “So, because [Paul] was of the same trade, he stayed with [Aquila & Priscilla] and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers.” (Acts 18:3). Some might carelessly say, “This is an example of Paul working at a secular job.” But this is not an example. This is an “account of action.” An “account of action” simply tells information about what someone did. It is not binding. It may be either good or evil. It simply imparts information about what happened, hence the name, “an account of action.”

One must be careful about calling an “account of action” an “example.” The two are not the same. The dictionary gives the following three possible definitions of “example”: (a) one that is representative of a group as a whole: *the squirrel, an example of a rodent*; (b) a punishment given as a warning or deterrent; (c) a similar case that constitutes a model or precedent (American Heritage, electronic version, 1996). Consider each of these definitions carefully.

### **A REPRESENTATIVE**

The first definition is “one that is representative of a group as a whole: *the squirrel, an example of a rodent*.” Scripture uses the word “example” like this. “My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as *an example* of suffering and patience” (Ja 5:10). The inspired prophets are used here as representatives of a whole group of people who suffered for God.

One passage which seems to cause concern for many is the following: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you *an example*, that you should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:14-15). When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet He gave us an item that was “representative of a group as a whole.” To illustrate, suppose a teacher wants to teach a science lesson about magnets. She tells the class, “Bring a magnet to school tomorrow. For example, bring a refrigerator magnet.” The teacher does not mean a refrigerator magnet is the only sort of magnet students are allowed to bring. She means a refrigerator magnet is “representative of a group of magnets as a whole.” Likewise, the Lord wanted disciples to perform acts of humility and acts of kindness toward one another. Washing feet was “representative of a group of actions as a whole.”

### **A DETERRENT**

The second definition is “a punishment given as a warning or deterrent.” Scripture uses “example” like this. “Now these things became our *examples*, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. ... Now all these things

happened to them as *examples*, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:6, 11). Here are punishments set forth as warnings to deter others from making the same mistakes.

## **A MODEL**

The third definition for “example” is “a similar case that constitutes a model or precedent.” The Webster dictionary reads, “one that serves as a pattern to be imitated” (Webster’s New Collegiate, 1979).

Think carefully about this important definition. If an example is something that “serves as a pattern to be imitated,” it becomes obvious that an “example” is binding by its very nature. The action of the example must be “imitated.” All Bible examples are binding by their very nature. It is simply wrong to say, “No Bible example is binding.” Here is another statement which is wrong, “To say examples are binding results in confusion.” What is confusing about this? If something is a true “example” it is to be imitated. It is binding.

“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps” (1 Pet 2:21). Here is Christ being held up as an “example” of how we should live. Would anyone dare say this example is not binding? Would anyone say this was confusing?

There are seven criteria which distinguish a simple “account of action” from an “example.”

### **(1) Background command**

True Bible “examples” must meet the test of a “background command.” The “law of background command” says: An account of action is binding only if it illustrates how to obey a previous command.

Here is an illustration: “In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me’” (1 Cor 11:25). Focus on the words “This do.” This means, “Do as I have done.” Here is a command to imitate the actions of the Lord. But there is more. “This do, as often as you drink it.” Christians are told to take the communion often, but how often and when? “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, ...” (Acts 20:7). Thus, Acts 20:7 is a binding example because it illustrates how to obey a command found in 1 Cor 11:25.

Here is another illustration: “Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you’” (Mt 26:27). Here is a command, “Drink from it, all of you.” All the disciples present are commanded to drink from one cup. Now see the example: “Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it” (Mk 14:23). Thus, Mark 14:23 is a binding example of using one cup in the Lord’s supper.

## **(2) Apostolic Approval**

True Bible “examples” must meet the test of “apostolic approval.” The “law of apostolic approval” says: For an account of action to be binding, it must be approved by an inspired apostle.

Consider the following passage:

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, “If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? (Gal 2:11-14).

Here is Peter acting like a hypocrite. Someone may say, “Here is apostolic approval – an example of being a hypocrite.” No. This behavior was rebuked by Paul, another inspired apostle. Gal 2:11-14 is merely an “account of action.” When an inspired apostle does something, and no rebuke is given, that action meets the test of “apostolic approval.”

Consider a previously used illustration: “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight” (Acts20:7). The background command for this example has already been noticed (1 Cor 11:25). The point to focus on now is that an inspired apostle approved the action by being present and by participating. No rebuke is ever given. This is a true binding example. Any congregation that does not require its members to gather on the first day of each week to break the bread is not entitled to wear the name “church of Christ.”

## **(3) The Law Of Unity**

True Bible “examples” must meet the test of “unity.” The “law of unity” says: If something is to be considered an “example,” it must harmonize with all other Bible passages. This is slightly different from the “law of apostolic approval.” The “law of apostolic approval” says there must be an apostle approving the action without any rebuke given. The law of unity says there must not be any contradiction whatsoever with other information revealed.

Acts 20:7-8 illustrates the law of unity. “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together.” Here are two items: (a) gathering on the first day to break bread and (b) gathering in an upper room. Focus on the upper room for a moment. Is this a binding example? People who try to justify themselves for not using one cup like Jesus did, point to the “upper room” and attempt to show disciples do not have to follow that “example” and therefore do not have to follow the “example” of one

cup. However, any attempt to bind the upper room, is futile because of the law of unity. The law of unity says no other passage may be contradicted. The passage contradicted in trying to bind the upper room is John 4:19-21: “The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.’” Jesus, here, looses the place of worship. He is teaching that in the gospel age it does not matter where God’s people gather for worship. To argue the upper room is binding is to contradict this passage. The upper room is not an example. It is merely “an account of action.” Remember, an example is an account of action that was intended as “a pattern to be imitated.” The upper room was not intended to be an example.

Although the upper room is not binding, weekly communion on the first day of the week is binding. “In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” (1 Cor 11:25-26). The phrase “as often as” occurs twice in this passage. It means “frequently.” Acts 20:7 harmonizes with the idea of “frequently.” No other passage is contradicted. Therefore, Acts 20:7 passes the test of harmonizing with other passages. It passes the test of the law of unity.

#### **(4) The Law Of Universal Application**

True Bible “examples” must meet the test of “universal application.” The “law of universal application” says: Everything taught in the gospel of Christ must be within the realm of possibility for all people in all parts of the world in every age. This law takes into consideration the fact that the gospel is intended for all people in all nations throughout all ages (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15).

Things which do not meet the test of “universal application” are: the upper room (Mk 14:15), traveling to Jerusalem for worship (Dt 12:13-14) and taking an animal to a Levitical priest for sacrifice (Heb 8:4). Baptism in water for the remission of sins is, however, an example of the law of universal application. “So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him” (Acts 8:38). This is something that can be done by every person in every country throughout all time.

When I was a teenager, I went door to door in Wichita, Kansas inviting people to study the Bible and come to church. I met a preacher who believed in sprinkling for baptism. He argued that immersion could not be a requirement for salvation. He asked, “What about someone who lives in the desert where there is not enough water to immerse? Are they going to be lost simply because they live in the desert?” I did not know what to say until later when an older brother wisely pointed out that people cannot live where there is not enough water to immerse. Water is essential for life. If there is not enough water for immersing someone, life cannot continue. Water is everywhere. Eighty percent of the world is covered with water. Immersion for the remission of sins passes the test of the law of universal application.

Weekly observance of the communion (Acts 20:7) passes the test of the law of universal application. In other words, it is within the realm of possibility for every Christian in every country throughout all ages to observe the communion on the first day of each week.

One cup in communion (Mk 14:23) also meets this same criterion. Every Christian in every country throughout all ages has and will have access to one drinking vessel.

### **(5) The Law Of Essentiality**

True Bible “examples” must meet the test of “essentiality.” The “law of essentiality” says: The thing under consideration must be essential in performing the command. Incidental things are not relevant.

Things which do not meet this test include:

- Where people are baptized – whether in a natural stream, a lake, or an artificial pool. What matters is that they are immersed for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).
- Where Christians assemble for worship – whether under a tree, in a rented building, or a private house. What matters is that they assemble for worship on the Lord’s day (Heb 10:25).
- The shape and size of the communion cup – whether the cup has handles or not, or what material the cup is made of. What matters is that the vessel is a drinking vessel called a “cup.”

Things which do pass the test of the law of essentiality include:

- One cup in communion (Mk 14:23; 1 Cor 11:25). Many times digressive preachers argue the container is an “incidental matter.” But when asked, “Do we have to have a cup?”, they answer, “Of course you have to have a cup because the fruit of the vine is a liquid; so you have to have a container of some sort.” If a container is essential (a “have to have” item), then it cannot be at the same time an incidental matter.
- Communion on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). Weekly observance of the Lord’s supper is essential to fulfill the command to observe communion frequently (1 Cor 11:25). Once again Acts 20:7 passes yet another the test of a true binding example – the law of essentiality.
- Much water for baptism (Jn 3:23). Baptism is called a burial (Rom 6:3-4) and therefore requires much water.

## **(6) The Law Of Competence**

True Bible “examples” must meet the test of “competence.” The “law of competence” says: There must be scripture which is competent to support the conclusion drawn.

To illustrate this, consider Acts 16:33, “He took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized.” This passage is used by Calvinists to demonstrate infant baptism. But is this passage competent to support the conclusion drawn? No. There is no mention of infants whatsoever. There are many families with no infants. Calvinists are making an unnecessary assumption with this passage.

Consider once again the information found in Acts 20:7, “Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, ...” Is this passage competent to prove weekly communion on the first day of the week? Yes. If it did not matter to God, no time element would be mentioned at all. In such a case, time and frequency would not matter. Christians could have communion whenever they desired and as frequently or infrequently as they choose. If God wanted communion to be a yearly event, a certain day of a certain month would have been specified. For example, God wanted the Passover to be a yearly feast. He specifically said it was to be observed on the fourteenth day of the first month (Lev 23:5). This means every year, once a year. It mattered to God when and how often this was observed. If God wanted communion to be a monthly event, a certain day of the month would be specified, but no certain month would be specified. For example, Numbers 28:14 and Numbers 29:6 speak of the offerings which are to be offered on the “new moon” day of the month. This means every month, once a month. It mattered to God when and how often this was observed. If God wanted communion to be a weekly event, a certain day of the week would be specified. Leviticus 23:3 speaks of rest on the Sabbath day. It was to be on the seventh day of the week. This meant every week, once a week. It mattered to God when and how often this was observed. Acts 20:7 says “on the first day of the week” the disciples came together to break the bread. This is competent to prove communion is to be observed weekly – every first day of week.

## **(7) The Law Of Limited Application**

True Bible “examples” must meet the test of “limited application.” The “law of limited application” says: A passage can be applied only to the circumstances which the Holy Spirit applied them to originally.

The Sabbath day will be used to illustrate this law. The Sabbath day was given only to Israelites. “Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed” (Ex 31:16-17). This passage explicitly teaches the Sabbath was a sign between the nation of Israel and God. To take the Sabbath and apply it to everyone in the world is to violate the law of limited application, because the Holy Spirit Himself limited this command to the Israelites.

Other laws can be used to illustrate the law of limited application. The laws of animal sacrifice are applicable (limited) only to men living under the OT. The OT has now been “nailed to the cross” (Col 2:14) and these laws no longer apply. The law of baptism is applicable (limited) only to alien sinners – people who need their sins washed away (Acts 22:16). The law of confessing sins and praying is applicable (limited) only to Christians – people who may call God their “Father” (Mt 6:9; 1 Jn 1:8-9). Acts 20:7 is limited to disciples of the NT dispensation: “Now on the first day of the week, when *the disciples* came together to break bread, ...” It is disciples who must keep this example, not unbelievers. Disciples who do not assemble will answer for this on Judgment Day. “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:25). When brethren use Acts 20:7 to teach weekly communion, such usage passes the test of limited application because brethren limit the passage to the very same group of people to which it was originally addressed – the disciples of Christ.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has pointed out the difference between an “account of action” and a binding “example.” For an action to qualify as an example, it must meet seven criteria:

- 1) Background command
- 2) Apostolic approval
- 3) Law of unity
- 4) Universal application
- 5) Law of essentiality
- 6) Law of competence
- 7) Law of limited application

An example is binding by virtue of the fact it is an example. When properly used, an example is an action “that serves as a pattern to be imitated.” All NT examples are binding and because they are binding, the Lord’s church insists on the following:

- Communion observed on the first day of every week (Acts 20:7).
- Only one loaf and one cup in communion (Mk 14:22-23; 1 Cor 10:17).
- All leaders of the church must be male (2 Tim 2:2; 1 Tim 2:8).
- Women must limit their teaching to the home (Acts 18:26; 21:8-9).



- All assemblies of the church must gather the disciples into one place – undivided and unclassified (1 Cor 14:26; Acts 15:30)
- A plurality of men to serve as elders in the church rather than a single man ruling (Acts 14:23; 1 Pet 5:1-3).
- The church treasury being used for only saints (Acts 11:29; 1 Cor 16:1-2).
- Baptism by immersion only (Acts 8:38).