



Conducted by
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“In 1 COR. 7:17 the apostle Paul is recorded as saying: “so ordain I in all churches”. Does this mean that he intended all local churches to do exactly the same things in all circumstances?”

Over the years I have heard this question discussed, debated, and argued over. Different points of view have been stated with much passion by various individuals, and on occasions it seems that more heat than light has been generated. However, I believe the Bible *does* give teaching relevant to this question, and even though we may not reach the ultimate answer, we shall at least learn enough to enable us to look at questions like this a little more objectively.

We must, therefore, keep certain questions to the forefront of our minds. What did Paul mean by ‘so ordain I’? Was he just referring to one specific problem, or does the phrase ‘so ordain I’ embrace all the teaching which he gave to the churches? What are his views on the autonomy of the local church? Did Paul envisage his teaching lasting for two thousand years, or was the Holy Spirit through Paul giving teaching for all time and all conditions of society? These questions, and others, must exercise our minds as we look at the various problems in our Christian experience, and attempt to relate these problems to teaching which was given and which is recorded for us in the New Testament.

‘So ordain I’

To ‘ordain’ means to arrange, appoint, or to prescribe. In 1 COR. 7:17 Paul, after some discussion on marital relationships, says: “Only, let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my

rule in all the churches" (R.S.V.) He then goes on to define certain conditions of life in which people might find themselves when called by the gospel, and the burden of his teaching seems to be that "every one should remain in the state in which he was called," (v20). But obviously, Paul does not intend the Corinthian Christians to think that this is a final and irrevocable command, for he goes on to say: "Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity". So what was Paul arranging or appointing in all the churches? Precisely as he said, that if possible all Christians should be content to remain in the state in which they were when called. He gives his reason for these instructions in verse 29, "But this I say, brethren, the time is short". It would seem that he and the other apostles expected the imminent return of the Lord.

Furthermore, Paul himself stated that he had chosen not to be a partaker of that which had been 'ordained' by the Lord Himself.

In 1 COR. 9:13ff we read: "Do you not know . . . that they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel. But I have used none of these things." So it would seem that even though certain things had been arranged or appointed for the well-being of the Church, there might be, under certain circumstances a modification of those things *as the scripture allows*. Where the scripture indicates absolute commands, and no modifications can be found then these commands must be obeyed implicitly; such things, I believe, would relate to the necessity to preach the gospel, obedience to the gospel, the government of the Church, etc.

We cannot leave this section without mentioning the authority for apostolic arrangement. This authority was given by the Lord in the coasts of Caesarea Philippi to Peter initially (Matt. 16:19) and then by extension to the rest of the Apostles (Matt. 18:18). The verb 'to bind' is used in the figurative sense in both of these cases. The first case would seem to indicate that Peter, by his ministry of the word, would keep unbelievers, i.e. those who did not believe that Jesus was the Christ, from entering the Church, and what Peter 'bound' by his ministry of the word at Pentecost (Acts 2:37-40) has stood until now and *will* stand to the end of the gospel era . . . As regards Matt. 18:18, the Lord seems to be teaching about disciplinary measures which would be required in the Church, and even though the offences which cause the trespasses may differ, the principle of dealing with these offences is set out quite clearly and authoritatively in Matt. 18:15-17.

The problem for the Church in these days is that the apostolic teaching is open to interpretation by all Christians (as it should be, of course), and it is a truism that hardly needs stating that we do not always arrive at the same conclusions. But God, in His wisdom, has catered for the well-being of the Church in its several localities by the authoritative 'binding' by the apostolic instruction as to how the Church should be governed and its affairs administered. (1 TIM. 3; Titus 1). This was why Titus was left in Crete, to set in order things which were 'lacking', viz., the establishment of scriptural government. A terrible responsibility rests upon the Elders of any community of Christians to guide and shepherd the 'flock' in accordance with apostolic instructions, and I wonder how many of us attempt to 'bind' upon brethren things which neither the Lord nor the Apostles 'bound' on the Church? But perhaps God in His infinite wisdom has also catered for our lack of knowledge and our inconsistencies. There are some things which are universally practised by Churches of Christ, but what would happen if there were absolute insistence that *all* things should be done in *exactly the same way in all churches*? If we 'got it wrong' then all would be wrong. But with individual assembly autonomy, then if one assembly became defective, *all* need not become so. Do we have an example of an apostolic instruction being left to an assembly decision: I believe we do.

The Example

The case I have in mind is recorded for us in 1 COR. 5 and is commonly referred to as 'the case of the incestuous brother'. A particularly crude form of fornication among the Corinthian Christians has evidently been reported to Paul. He refers to an earlier letter (v9), one not preserved to us (what a 'find' that would be) in which he has taught about fornication. Even though absent from them, he has judged the case already and wants the offender excommunicated. He wants this done "when ye are gathered together" (v4). It is to be 'in the name of the Lord, and with my spirit', but evidently the decision as to whether to obey Paul must be an assembly decision. The letter containing this instruction was evidently delivered by the hand of Titus.

In his second letter to Corinth and at chapter 2 Paul asks for forgiveness for the offender. He again indicates the original decision to excommunicate as being an assembly one, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many", (2 COR. 2:6). Paul, amid his joy at having another door opened unto him for the gospel, seems nevertheless unsettled because he does not know the complete reaction of the Corinthian brethren, "Furthermore, when I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I found not Titus my brother" (v12). However, as we read on in the letter about his trials in Macedonia, we also read about his unrestrained joy at the coming of Titus, "Nevertheless God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not by his coming only, but by the consolation wherewith he was comforted in you, when he told us your earnest desire, your mourning, your fervent mind toward me; so that I rejoiced the more" (2 COR. 7:6, 7). If we read on we see not only the apostles' concern but the obligation which is placed on every assembly of Christians, "In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter." (v11).

To my mind this incident indicates that even in a situation involving the purity of a church, an apostolic instruction had to be ratified by an assembly decision; the Corinthian brethren *could* have refused to obey Paul. I believe Paul understood this, and his joy knew no bounds when Titus brought him the good news.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? There are, I believe, many commands given to the Church which all should obey. Hence Jesus, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned," (Mark 16:16). Hence Peter, "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Hence Paul, echoing the words of his Master concerning the Breaking of Bread, "This do, in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor. 11:23-26). So we could go on.

I am also persuaded that certain apostolic instructions must be interpreted relative to the time and culture of different peoples. Paul wrote to Timothy, "That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth," (1 Tim. 2:15). Prior to this Paul had said: "that women adorn themselves in modest apparel" that is an apostolic instruction, but 'modest apparel' is capable of being interpreted in every age and society without it necessarily being the same as that which would be worn by women of Paul's day, and the society in which he lived. The principles which do not change are modesty, and proper and decent behaviour in the Church (and I don't mean the building only).

I believe that if we will all give ourselves to a study of the Bible then we shall know what commands we have to obey, and we shall be able to wend our way successfully in life according to the principles laid down for our Christian living.