

The Puzzling Story of Our Church Practices

May this stimulate gracious conversation, assist in biblical discernment,
and defuse potential conflict as we seek to serve God in our various settings.

by Kerry S. Doyal

Below is a multi-tasking story; it is a puzzle and a teaching / discussion tool. The story describes a slice of typical church life. It is filled with church practices, preferences, phrases, and programs that are often as precious to us as Biblical mandates but are – if we are honest - just our ways of “doing church.” (See how many you can find.)

Hopefully our ways of doing church and ministry have a biblical basis and represent godly goals. However, to say they are all commanded in the Bible in the form in which we do them most likely goes further than the text allows.

To be clear, just because something is non-biblical (not directly commanded in Scripture), does not make it unbiblical. There is a huge difference between the two. For example, cars are non-biblical. Scripture says nothing about cars. Murder is unbiblical, forbidden in God’s word.

When methods and manners of ministry are non-biblical, room is left for discussion, discernment, and discretion. We need to remember and admit that our “How To’s” may be matters of preference, culture, or habit.

I have not written this to mock or disparage certain church behaviors or traditions, even though I have sought to be humorous. Also, to be as even-handed as possible, I have tried to borrow from many kinds of churches.

My goal is to provide a means for us to understand that some of the ways and customs that often define and divide us are historically new and culturally derived. We can do a lot of ministries in different ways and still honor God. In fact, most churches around the world and through time have “done church” differently than we do.

As threatening as it may be, we need to recognize that many of our preferences are not prescribed in the Bible. As such, they should be held loosely and open to scrutiny, updating or abandoning. Circle all the cultural church practices, preferences and phrases in our story. Let’s begin:

A Typical day of Church at Church for the Church

The invitation was brief today. Was the Preacher hungry or did the Spirit move on him to close it sooner than usual? Or did credit for a quick exit belong to Sister Kathy and the motivation provided by her steely glare? No matter, the closing benediction was well received, and the final “Amen” voiced by almost everyone. How good it was for church to end unified.

No one had given their heart to Jesus or joined the church. In fact, no one had come to the altar to pray. Yet, one could sense the moving of God’s Spirit in the service.

As the piano provided the clear signal of the end of worship (the guitarist was sick), people stepped into their roles, which were legion.

The Preacher, no longer behind the pulpit, had stealthily assumed his place at the exit of the sanctuary to shake hands, and receive “input”. A monotone chorus of “Good sermon, Pastor” would be the last contact he would

have for the week with most of the church. Thankfully, small groups would keep some encouraged, accountable, growing, serving, connected.

Many worshippers politely and briskly headed to their cars, where they would stash their kids and Bibles. At least the kids would get out at home. Information of VBS plans nor Sunday School coloring would not make it in the house.

Two deacons collected the offering plates off the communion table to count the tithes, offerings, special giving, and pledges. Visitor cards and prayer requests were sorted to give to the pastor who would disperse them.

Jeff, an industrious and venerable elder, had already re-set the thermostat, turned off lights and called down a preteen for running in the sanctuary - improper behavior in God's house.

The Youth Group clustered informally to discuss their upcoming retreat at Camp Dingo Wanna. They were buzzing about the concert they had gone to last night. They were a tight-knit group (an impenetrable clique?), having gone through confirmation together.

Sunday School teachers revisited their classes to finish putting away curricula and craft supplies and broom away cookie crumbs. Forgotten Bibles were gathered, the mission offering can was emptied, and posters swapped out on the bulletin board.

Good old "Uncle Clayton," was gathering left behind bulletins and empty communion cups from the now messy pews and kneeling rail. Cushions needed straightening and paper airplanes awaited a final approach. Notes written by bored kids would provide a temptation to read and a mystery to solve - matching the authors with their scribblings. Knowing where everyone sat gave invaluable clues. Hymnals, pew Bibles, visitor cards and offering envelopes needed to be stowed away and restocked.

Kamden, a bright teen who loved electronics, was shutting down the sound system, and stage lights. He had already secured his thumb drive with the Power Point data, turned off the projector and noted probable causes of the sound board settings that produced the hisses and pops. A midweek evaluation was overdue, especially before they hosted the multi-church Singing next week. He hadn't given up his dream of having a fog machine.

Ed was seeing that the choir robes and vestments were hung up neatly, while Martha was filing away sheet music. She had already written postcards - during the sermon, of course - to send to members who had "no showed" due to colds and conflicts - both scheduled and otherwise. With candles blown out, baptistery lights turned off, and wrappers picked up, the choir loft was secured.

The Preacher's wife, gathering her kids, fielded questions and comments from parishioners. She had already made sure the coffeepots were unplugged and washed up a few dishes. With lunch to prepare and naps to provide for, the hours would be few before the sparsely attended evening service.

Nursery workers had emptied the trash, disinfected the cribs, and handed off the little ones in record time today. With the last toy put away, they scurried to meet their family in the vestibule and pick up their free CD of the sermon, which they had missed in their service to moms and the Lord.

The memorial flowers on the altar had almost been taken home, but then Gloria remembered the evening service. She wanted to take them to the cemetery today, but that would have to wait. She smiled, remembering how much the nursing home had appreciated the extra flowers sent over after the Spring Revival.

As the last one drove away in the shadow of the steeple, to the sounds of bells, all in all, it was another typical day of church at church for the church.

