

WHAT IS STANDARD-- for the CHURCH?

A look at the church world today in Christianity finds a wide variety of governance, practices, and principles in place at congregations. Is there a standard or norm that could be and should be followed? Can we find such standards in early Christianity? A careful study of the church in the book of Acts and in the epistles as well as examination of ancient writings shows that there were common grounds of orthodoxy in first-century Christian church life. What were these standards or norms?

(1) The Church was made up of congregations of believers or disciples, who were called Christians. They recognized Jesus as Savior and as the founder of the Church. (2) These congregations met together in a special place and a special way the first day of each week, for simple worship and fellowship. (3) There were church officials: Elders or Bishops, who had spiritual leadership responsibility over the local body, and Deacons, who had responsibility for the community of the church in the area of material needs. (4) There were specific qualities needed in these leaders who were designated and set apart by the local church. (5) The ordinances of the Church were centered in Christ and were (a.) Baptism, the immersion of the penitent believer in water. This act climaxed their faith in Jesus for salvation and made them a part of the body, the church. (b.) The Lord's Supper, the weekly observance of the memorial meal as established by Jesus. (6) The membership of the churches remained steadfast in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, and used their various spiritual gifts to edify and mentor others. (7) The churches participated in their primary mission- world evangelism, through the preaching of the gospel locally and the sending forth of ambassadors to other lands, as commanded by Christ. (8) The Church was active in benevolence as an integral part of their duty, looking after the needs of others, especially those of the faith. (9) The members of the churches brought regular offerings to the leaders to support the evangelism and benevolent outreach. (10) Prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit comforted and supported the church in all areas. (11) The membership was expected to live moral lives. Admonishment, teaching and discipline, when necessary, kept them on the right road. (12) There was a unity of purpose among all, and instances of cooperation and consultation with other congregations.

We see cultural background brought about different observances and practices among churches then, as certainly they may now. But there is no reason all churches seeking to follow Christ, can't be true to the precedents set by the early followers of Jesus. A return to the New Testament and historical norms would provide a basis for unity and growth and an end to the maze of denominational confusion today.