

Echoes

There are, especially in the South, some churches that call themselves “Primitive.” There are Primitive Methodists, Primitive Baptists, and lots of Primitive Other Stuff. What those churches mean by that term is that they don’t do anything – *anything* – unless it is explicitly described in the New Testament. Sunday Schools? No; they aren’t mentioned in the New Testament. Missionary boards and sending agencies? No; not explicitly named in scripture. Musical instruments? Nope. Not in the *New* Testament. The idea seems to be that whatever the New Testament Church is described as doing is the way things ought to be – and the *only* way things ought to be.

Wouldn’t it be simple if we could do that? If we could just take the New Testament as the sole and final authority on everything, exactly as it is? What the NT says is final, and if the NT doesn’t mention it, then it’s wrong. But here are some of the consequences of that line of thought if we try to be consistent. Women would have to wear head coverings in church and could not have short hair (1 Cor. 11). Slavery would be perfectly fine (Eph. 6, 1 Tim. 6, Philemon, etc.). Not paying your full offering to church would be a capital offense (Acts 5). People from Crete would all be lazy, vicious, gluttons (Titus 1), and marriage would be a last resort, a necessary concession that God has allowed for weak people (1 Cor. 7). Sermons would last from dinner until midnight (Acts 20:7).

It seems better to me – though admittedly much harder – to read the inspired words of scripture as the record of God’s people trying to find their way in a difficult world. Called by God, empowered by God, seeking God, they some-times respond to their world in ways that demonstrate the very heart of God. Other times they screw up royally. Our task as interpreters of scripture is not just to do whatever they did in the Bible but rather to look to the witness of scripture for echoes of our own situation and learn from both the victories and the mistakes of God’s people.

We’re going to explore this task in the coming weeks. On Sunday mornings, I will be preaching about some of those “Echoes.” We will look at seven different times when the community of the faithful (Israel in the Old Testament; the Church in the New) faced challenges in their society, how they responded, and – most of all – where was God in it all? We will encounter heroes worth emulating. We will encounter horrible mistakes worth avoiding. We will meet people of faith who fit easily and comfortably in their

culture, and we will meet others who stand against culture for all they are worth. But mostly, I suspect, we will meet ourselves.

Whatever we find, though, I can promise you this: we aren't going to en-counter scripture that serves as a straightforward blueprint for our lives. What we will find will be much messier and immeasurably more difficult than that: we will hear stories that invite us to think, to reflect, and then to choose our own way among the echoes.