

What is Expedient?

In the previous lesson, we looked at how sometimes God gives specific instructions, and sometimes He gives only general instructions. We noted that when God gives specific instructions, we are left with little room for personal judgment on the manner in which we fulfill the instructions. We must simply do what God has instructed. However, when He only gives general instructions, we are left with far more judgment on how to obey. The freedom we have to implement our choices can be described as *expedient*.

Dictionary.com defines expedient as:

adjective

1. *tending to promote some proposed or desired object; fit or suitable for the purpose; proper under the circumstances:*

It is expedient that you go.

2. *conducive to advantage or interest, as opposed to right.*
3. *acting in accordance with expediency, or what is advantageous.*

noun

4. *a means to an end:*

The ladder was a useful expedient for getting to the second floor.

5. *a means devised or employed in an exigency; resource; shift:*

Use any expedients you think necessary to get over the obstacles in your way.

The idea behind an expedient is that it accomplishes a task in a given situation. When a particular task is given, but specific instructions are not provided, then one can choose what is the most expedient way to achieve the desired end.

Secular Examples...

This is, as with some of our previous topics, an area where our secular experience can help us with understanding the spiritual applications. We have very little trouble identifying the use of expedients in the secular realm. For example, if a parent were to tell his child to clean his room, the child would have many options. He knows that he is to start with the room in the current condition, and work on it until it fits the description of what the parent would call “clean.” But, does he clean up the Legos first? Or the stuffed animals? Does he work on the bookshelves, or the floor? Does he make his bed first, or last? The manner in which he accomplishes the task that has been given to him are of little concern. He cannot, however, go outside and play and claim that he is doing what his parent told him to do!

In the work place, the doing what is expedient is expected of the employee. If a boss had to specify every single detail of how to accomplish a task, he might as well do it all himself! Instead, supervisors expect to be able to give more general instructions, and know that the employees will use the

most expedient solutions available to them to complete the task. Any tools that are available to complete the task at hand are acceptable for use.

Biblical Examples...

Of course, our primary concern is how we see the idea of expedients in a biblical context. Some object to an appeal to expedients, as the idea is not clearly expressed in scripture. There are several passages in which the term *expedient* is used in the King James Version, and translated as *helpful* or *profitable* in other translations. However, in most of those instances (John 11:50; 1 Corinthians 6:12; 2 Corinthians 8:10; 2 Corinthians 12:1) the word is not used in the same type of context as we are considering here. We are thinking about specific practices that would fall into the category of being *expedient* because they are the most useful ways of accomplishing a particular task. However, just as we have looked at the natural idea of communication, and noted that the principles for understanding God's communication are the same as understanding communication with one another, we can see that just as we naturally make choices to fulfill unspecified instructions in our natural world experience, we must do the same with fulfilling the instructions of God. When God gives us a task to do, but does not give specific instructions, we must make choices about how we are going to accomplish the given task.

It needs to be pointed out that the use of expedients do not authorize any particular task. Sometimes, men will argue that an expedient authorizes some activity, when in fact God has spoken to the issue in more specific detail. One cannot appeal to an expedient to authorize some activity that has not been authorized by God! In other words, expedients are only convenient methods of implementing the tasks that God has already authorized.

To illustrate this point, we will return to the example of music in worship. We have seen in previous lessons that God has been very specific about the type of music that He has authorized: singing and making melody in the heart (Ephesians 5:17-21; Colossians 3:16). One cannot come along and say that they have decided that it is more expedient to sing with an instrument. At that point, they have added to the instructions that have been given by God, and they are not doing just what God gave permission to do. A true expedient will accomplish only what God has authorized.

In the last lesson, we used the example of Noah building the ark to illustrate how God could be specific in some instructions, and yet be general with the giving of other instructions. Remember, Noah could only use Gopher wood because God specified the type of wood. He did not, however, specify where Noah was to get the wood, and how he was to transport it to the work site. Noah had been authorized to get the wood to the site. How else could he build the ark? But, because God had not specified how he was to get it there, Noah could choose the most *expedient* method. In our second example, David moving the ark of the covenant, we saw that God had dictated the method of moving the ark, and so David could not change it and be pleasing to God. David thought that he knew the most expedient way of moving the ark, and his error cost Uzzah his life! When God has specified some action, we cannot appeal to *expedient* to change it!

We make choices concerning what is expedient quite frequently. We can return to another example that we introduced in the last lesson: Jesus' instruction for the disciples to "go into all the world and preach the gospel..." (Mark 16:15-16). When one of those disciples chose to get on a boat, or to walk, or to ride a mule, they were choosing what was most expedient for them. They had to assess their own situation (where they were going, how long they would be traveling, etc...) to determine what mode of transportation would be best for their journey. Walking to Crete (an island nation) would certainly not be expedient! Evangelists today make the same type of decisions. One who is going from the United States to Africa certainly wouldn't walk, ride a bike, ride a horse, or

take a train. He might take a plane, or a boat. Most, of course, would determine that when taking into account expense, time of travel, and a schedule that needed to be kept, the most expedient solution would be to take an airplane.

Another good example of this concept is found in 1 Corinthians 16:3. After giving instructions for the taking up of a collection to help the needy saints in Judea, Paul wrote:

And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me (1 Corinthians 16:3–4).

Paul, as God's inspired spokesman, did not give specific instructions on who was to be given this task. He clearly left the decision, the judgment, up to the church in Corinth. They were to decide who would accompany Paul and deliver the funds. This is an example of an expedient. Whatever they found to be the most useful solution to this instruction would be implemented by the church in Corinth.

Who decides what is expedient?

Answering this question shows us the wisdom of God in establishing the autonomy of the local congregation. In the New Testament, we see that the local church is the highest organization of the Lord's body. There are no national, or international organizations for the local body to answer to. It has the responsibility of implementing the instructions that God has given for the work and worship of the church.

This principle is important because it shows us that the local church is responsible for establishing what is expedient for their circumstances. No two churches are exactly alike, and so what may be expedient for one congregation of God's people may not be expedient for another congregation. It is impossible for other congregations to have the information that they need to determine what is best for another congregation.

God expects that we will be concerned about the functioning of our own local congregation. The instructions that He provides points us to maintaining the purity of His body where we are members (Ephesians 5:22-33). Members of some other congregation (or the congregation as a whole) have no right to judge another congregation for their choices in the realm of expedients. They may not like the practices that another congregation implements to fulfill the instructions of the Lord in the local body, but such should not matter. Local churches should implement what they believe to be the best practices to fulfill their instructions, and it should not concern them what people in other congregations think of their decisions. If we cannot make decisions within the local congregation, without condemnation from other churches, then autonomy does not truly exist. Only the local body can determine what they believe to be expedient for their particular group!

Expedients in Action...

Earlier, we looked at some biblical examples of expedients. Those examples provide for us an understanding of how God did not provide specific instructions, and yet the men who received the instructions found a way to implement them. There are many things that fall into the same category in the work and worship of the church today. Local bodies must make decisions about what is the most expedient way to accomplish what we have been given to do. Lets begin with the worship of the local body.

Singing. As we have been using this as an example throughout our study, we will consider it once again. We know that we have been instructed to "sing and make melody" in our hearts "to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:17-21; Colossians 3:16) We also saw that we have a responsibility to do things

“decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). We are not told, however, on either account how to specifically do these things. That means that the local congregation can make decisions about what best suits their needs to be able to fulfill the instructions given. Different congregations may make different choices. Will they have songbooks? Will they use screen projections? When considering cost, size of congregation, and other congregation specific information, what is the best choice that they can make? As technology advances, some of these areas will offer more and more options. If we are not changing the activity (singing and making melody in our hearts) then we are free to choose what works best for a given congregation.

Time and location of worship. We are given both instruction and examples of the first century church meeting together. There are, in fact, several things (not the least of which is the Lord’s Supper) which are predicated on meeting together. For a group to meet together, they must know where and when they are going to get together. Consider that if you are to meet a friend for lunch, you must know where and when you will meet, else you will never find one another! However, the type of place nor the specific time are not identified in the New Testament for the meeting of the local body. Each local congregation must make a decision about what time is most convenient for the group. This is evident in a couple of New Testament passages. In Acts 20, though a specific time is not mentioned, it appears that the church was meeting later in the evening. This would not be an uncommon practice, as many would be required to work every day. They could assemble after they were off of work for the day. In Acts 5, however, it appears that the assembly probably took place earlier in the day. While we are having to make some assumptions (as the details are not given), it appears that Ananias and Sapphira came to give their money (1 Corinthians 16, on the first day of the week), sometime in the middle of the day. They were not together, but Sapphira came 3 hours after Ananias. It is possible that this took place prior to the assembly, rather than after it, and so they could have been planning to meet later in the evening as well. The group in Acts 5 did have a plan for the members to bring their contribution, as they knew where and when to take it to the apostles!

The time that is most effective for one congregation may not be effective at all for another congregation. While 10 AM may be beneficial to one group, another may decide it is more effective to meet at 2 PM. These individual congregations can also make the determination about how many assemblies they want to have on the first day of the week. We have made it a custom in the United States to have two assemblies, one in the morning and another in the evening. But, there is no indication in the scriptures that we must meet twice. We have freedom to choose to do so, meeting as often as we deem to be expedient, but those are choices for the local church to make!

These same principles apply to other meeting times throughout the week as well. We are given instructions on how to encourage and edify one another, and we accomplish that through assemblies and Bible study periods together. We are not given any specific day to do this, other than the assembly on the first day of the week in which the congregation is to partake of the Lord’s Supper together (1 Corinthians 11:17 ff). We can, therefore, choose when the best day and time is for the church to meet. For some, a midweek service is expedient, and they choose to meet on Wednesday evening (the traditional midweek day for the United States). However, some may determine that Tuesday, or maybe Thursday are a more convenient time. There is nothing in scripture that would dictate a particular day or time! We exercise the same type of judgment when we have evangelistic efforts like a gospel meeting. We determine when we think the best time for such events would be beneficial, and proceed with them. In these areas, there is no right or wrong choice. As long as we do not violate God’s specific instructions with our practices, we are able to implement our judgments as to what we believe to be best for the local congregation. Whether we meet at 8 AM on Sunday morning, or 8 PM on Sunday evening, we have fulfilled the instructions given by God to

meet upon the first day of the week. There are many choices that an individual congregation can make concerning the day (other than the first day of the week) and time of the assembled worship. Each local group must choose what is best for their members, to provide for their needs as a group.

The location of worship is also an area that a local group has much choice. In the New Testament, we see Christians worshipping in various places. Basically, anywhere they had room for their group was utilized by early Christians, including: outdoor venues, the Jewish synagogues, the Temple portico in Jerusalem, various houses, and rooms. This broad range of locations tells us that the location is not important. Christians can meet anywhere!

We are told that we are not to “forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is,” and we are shown first century Christians assembling together. This tells us that they had to have a place to assemble. You cannot assemble without a location to do so, and plans made for a time. Those things that are necessary to fulfill instructions given, but are not specified, are expedients. We can choose what is the most expedient meeting place for us. We must, however, make sure that we do not violate other instructions or principles that are given to us by God. We cannot, for example, decide that some sinful, ungodly place is the “best place for us to assemble.” We can choose to use facilities that are available to us, whether it be homes of the members, some outdoor venue, a rented room, or a purchased facility. What is most expedient for a particular group will be based upon its own needs. A group of 10 Christians should not find it expedient to build a brand new building that seats 200 people! They must evaluate their own circumstances, needs, and financial situation, and then make a decision about what is best for them.

This evaluation of a group’s particular needs is the key to understanding that only they can make the decision as to what is expedient. Other groups cannot know all of the details of the decision making process that an autonomous group goes through to determine what they will do.

Aids for teaching and worship. Paul spoke in Ephesians 4 about the process that God gave to the church to “edify the body.” But, how does that happen on a practical level? Paul’s letter emphasized the need for instruction, teaching how to grow to be more like Christ. How can we do that on a practical level? Can we have materials that aid us in such instruction? Can we have projectors that make it possible to show charts to explain scripture? Such are expedients, as God did not specify how to achieve this end. We are told what to teach, meaning we are to teach how to be more like Christ, but as far as what methods we must use, God has not specified.

We have used the example of singing quite extensively through these lessons. We have established the need for Christians to “speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in their hearts to the Lord” (from Ephesians 5:19). We also saw from 1 Corinthians 14 that we have an obligation to do “all things decently and in order.” How can we ensure that we are able to fulfill both of these instructions? God has not specified, which means He has left it up to us to decide what is most expedient for us. We can use song books, along with a song leader to direct the singing so that things remain orderly. We can use projected songs, placing the song in front of all of the assembly so that it is convenient to see and follow.

We cannot, however, make additions to the singing and claim them to be expedients. We cannot, for example, add in a piano, organ, or band, and think that we are fulfilling the instruction to “sing”. We have, in fact, added an element that changes the initial instructions.

Any time we use an aid to fulfill our given instructions, it is imperative that we examine the end practice and ensure that it is only that which we have been instructed to do. We may have more than one way to fulfill an instruction, but that does not change the instruction itself! If we are doing something other than the original instruction, then we have added to the instruction, not found an

aid to help us to fulfill it. When we use a song book to help keep order in the assembly, we are only singing in the end. If we add an instrument, we are singing and playing. That is not an aid, but rather an addition.

Misuse of expedients. There has been an effort throughout time to use the concept of expedients to authorize practices. As we addressed earlier, an expedient does not authorize anything. It fulfills the authorized instruction. An expedient doesn't make something lawful, it must be lawful first! There are many who use this idea to justify practices that are not lawful. For example, some say that the formation of a Missionary Society to preach the gospel is just an expedient. After all, God did not specify how we are to "go", so we have the freedom to provide for, and fund, the spreading of the gospel in any way that we see fit. The problem is, God has spoken about the manner in which the gospel was to be supported. Each local congregation determined to support men who were preaching the gospel. We see this most clearly with the apostle Paul. He had a close relationship with the Philippian brethren who were helping to support him financially in the work he was doing. Every example that we have in scripture indicates that there was no higher organization than the local church, who made these decisions, and provided as they could. It was a responsibility that was placed upon them directly, not something they could pass on through some extra-biblical organization or society. When we add something else into the equation, we not longer have an aid, but rather an addition. This same idea can be applied to such instruments as orphan's homes, hospitals and schools. God has given the care of such to individuals. Only in very limited cases has God authorized the church to provide some of these needs to those of their local number. To think that the church can join in cooperation with a group of churches to provide an extended organization to care for these issues is without scriptural foundation.

As we consider what is expedient, we must keep in mind this crucial point. Appealing to "expedient" does not authorize a practice. The general practice that an expedient implements must be authorized first. Otherwise, we are acting outside the realm of God's authority. Remember what Paul wrote:

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Colossians 3:17).

Everything that we do must be done by the authority of Jesus. If we are operating outside of His authority, we are not serving Him, but serving our own desires. We can, when God has not specified a specific manner to fulfill His instructions, seek out the most expedient way. But, we must be very careful not to stray into unauthorized practices!

Questions...

1. Define *expedient*.
2. Provide two examples of expedients from the secular world.
3. Provide two examples of biblical men or women using expedients to fulfill the instructions that God provided to them.
4. Provide two examples of expedients that we use in the work and worship of the church today.
5. What limitations must be placed on the use of *expedients*?
6. Who gets to decide what is expedient for a local congregation? Why is this important?
7. How have some misused the idea of expedients to justify unauthorized practices?

