

Expediencies

When the high priest Caiaphas “advised the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people” (John 18:14; also 11:50), the word he used is rendered in Greek as *sympherō* which is also translated “**profit(able),**” “**helpful,**” “good/better,” “benefit,” or “advantage” in 14 of its 15 other occurrences in the New Testament (See www.BlueLetterBible.org). Merriam-Webster defines *expedient* as “**suitable for achieving a particular end** in a given circumstance.” The word “expedient” often comes up in a discussion of establishing Bible authority, though it is not used specifically in that context in Scripture.

Defining terms

Two criteria:

- Lawful end and means
- Supportive

Three examples from New Testament worship

Note that, for an effort at clarity, I’m avoiding the practice of some which is to contrast “aids” and “additions.” Almost every tool or method we use will be something *additional* to what we read, because tools and methods are often not specified. I’m also avoiding any discussion of what’s “efficient,” because that involves either measuring something that God expresses no interest in, and/or measuring something *subjectively*.

In order for a method or a tool to be considered an “**expedient**” (and therefore allowable), it has to meet **two criteria**.

- 1) **The end, as well as the method or tool, must be lawful.** If the end is not something authorized by God, the means are irrelevant and prohibited. The priests **Nadab and Abihu** sinned when offering incense. They acted *without God’s authority*, and God struck them dead (Leviticus 10:1-3). The Scripture explains that the fire they offered was “strange” (ASV, NASB, KJV), “profane” (NKJV), or “**unauthorized**” (ESV, HCSB, NIV) because it was fire “**which He had not commanded them**” (ASV, ESV, NASB, NKJV, HCSB, emphasis added), “contrary to his command” (NIV) (verse 1). Similarly, the *means* must be lawful; the ends do *not* justify the means. Using carnal tactics such as deceit, covetousness, or other unrighteousness in taking a collection for the needy saints, for example, would be wrong. The point is that an expedient is something that “helps” or “is profitable” *to carrying out a command or to following an example*.
- 2) The method or tool must **only be supportive** to God’s service for carrying out a command or complying with an example. If the method could have stood alone, it was something *else*, a separate activity. However, if, having used a particular method, all you’ve done was carry out the command, it was an *expedient*. For example, sailing only helped preachers *go*, and having lamps in an upper room only facilitated the assembling and the preaching.

Here are **three examples from New Testament worship** to help us explore “expedients.”

The Lord’s Supper. God specified the elements we are to use, namely bread and “the fruit of the vine” (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). Beyond that, how to take those elements – with or without trays, simultaneously or in sequence, etc. – is up to us. Specialized trays and men passing them are simply *expedients to participating in the Lord’s Supper*. On the other hand, adding some action to the observance or changing one of the elements would not “expedite” the observance of the Supper. It would change it to be something *other than* the Lord’s Supper.

Preaching. When Jesus *preached* in John 6, He also *fed* thousands of people miraculously. These were two separate activities, both in substance and in time. He did not use feeding people as a way to draw a crowd (although modern churches often do). In fact, Jesus *chided* the people when, on the next day, they *came seeking* the physical food! Meals, sports, and camping trips are not *ways to preach*; they are *separate activities*. They can stand alone and *do not support* the preaching. If anything, they *detract from* preaching. If a spiritual message is inserted, the attendees will likely tolerate it, but I met a young man whose example highlighted the separateness of the events: When basketball season was over, he stopped “going to church.” He obviously wasn’t there for the message. He had come for the “main attraction” which, in that case, was *basketball*. On the other hand, the use of PowerPoint or a whiteboard or some “old school” technology to show maps, graphics, and key points simply helps carry out the command to *preach*. They are *expedients to the preaching*.

Music. The Scriptures tell us, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Colossians 3:16). We are given a specific kind of music for worship: one in our hearts, sung with wisdom and grace, and, from 1 Corinthians 14, “with the understanding,” “for edification,” and “decently and in order” (verses 15, 26, 40). We are not told how to get the pitch, how to arrange the music, or who should pick the songs and start the singing. If we use a pitch pipe to help us get the pitch, song books to help us know the words, and a song leader to bring order to the process, all you can say is that **we have done what was commanded**. Those tools and methods simply *supported our singing*; they were *expedients*.

To help decide whether something is expedient, focus on the command or example under consideration, and ask yourself, “What does the command allow? What would it exclude?” In the case of singing, “What does the command ‘sing’ allow? What does it exclude?” Playing musical instruments is in *another category* of music; it can stand alone and does not simply support our efforts to *sing*.

We must make our actions as specific as God’s word, and **there is no expediency if an action violates God’s silence**. There is no New Testament statement or example authorizing instrumental music. Musical instruments, therefore, are not expedients to our singing; they are a separate activity which God has not authorized for worship in the New Testament.