

Does a Rule of life still work in the 21st century?

One of the big questions that comes up in church planting is this....

Should we only preach Jesus and teach the scriptures? Or should we, (in addition to preaching Jesus and teaching the scriptures) help new believers establish a rule of life that will assist them in living godly lives?

In the last number of decades there have been various conservative Anabaptists who have started churches around the world, who believed that it is best to teach people what they need to know, but then let them decide how they want to put these teachings into practice.

Often this is in reaction to a corporate rule of life that they didn't like too well. Or perhaps it is the result of listening to evangelists and church planters who believe that it is better for the Holy Spirit to teach new converts how they should apply the scriptures, rather than help them set up a corporate rule of life.

For example:

These church planters may teach their converts that TV is known to do a lot of spiritual harm and should be avoided, but not have a prohibition against watching TV like we would find in the typical conservative Anabaptist church.

They may teach that Christians should not get caught up in politics, but they would not do anything other than keep on teaching if someone in the church did get involved in politics.

In this topic I will be promoting the idea that it is a good for a church fellowship to have a rule of life. I believe that we have a New Testament precedent for this.

Church planting among the unchurched and with people of different cultures and nationalities has a way of testing our ideas about church, and helps us discern whether our ideas are any good.

In this presentation, I'm assuming that a corporate Rule of life is a good thing. If you aren't convinced of this basic premise, then I suggest you read the book, *The Benedict Option* by Rod Dreher. Dreher explains the philosophy behind spiritual community that Anabaptists have known for hundreds of years.

We haven't always been able to explain it or articulate it very well but any of us who have grown up with it have experienced the benefits of it.

So the questions we will be considering today are...

Does a Rule of life still work in the 21st century?

What is the nature of a spiritual rule of life?

What should guide the construction of a corporate rule of life?

How can a rule of life be used to bless the church?

What challenges do Westerners face in submitting to a rule of life and what can be done about this?

Let's begin by defining what we are talking about. The term "rule of life" might be an unfamiliar term, but I think that most of you believe in it.

A rule of life is the principles or disciplines that guide and shape the thinking and living of an individual or a group of people.

One of the dictionary definitions for "community" is, "a group of men or women leading a common life according to a rule".

A rule of life can be something personal that an individual crafts for their own development and spiritual life.

Or

A rule of life can also be something corporate – something that is adopted by a group of individuals that is intended to help them develop as a group.

A corporate Rule of life (as we are discussing today) is the foundational expectations that a group of people have for each other. The goal of these expectations is to help each other grow spiritually. The rule of life is communicated in oral form or in written form. Often it is a combination of written and oral expectations.

The concept of rule of life goes way back in history. From the very beginning of the church, Christians who wanted to set themselves apart in dedicated service to God, adopted a rule of life that would help them worship God and serve God, together.

The meaning of the word “Rule” (in Greek and Latin and Greek roots) purportedly carries the idea of a “trellis.”

A trellis is a structure designed to enable a grapevine to get off the ground and grow upward, becoming more fruitful and more productive.

In the same way, a rule of life can be the trellis that helps us abide in Christ and become more fruitful spiritually.

I spent some time looking at Philippians 3:16 where Paul says,

“nevertheless, to the extent that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us think the same thing.”

I was interested in knowing whether the Apostle Paul was advocating a practical rule of life, or whether he was simply saying that we should all live up to the things we have learned about being a Christian.

I don’t know that we can use this verse to say that everyone in a church should be following the same rule of life.

But when we read the book of Acts, we can see that when a group of people are learning from God collectively, there is a consistency of practice that develops from this.

Acts 4:32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

How did that happen? How could more than 3000 new believers all relinquish their hold on material possessions and share their goods with each other and with others who had need in the community?

I think this is what happens when a group of believers are unitedly taking on the mind of Christ, and they begin to think the same thing. They develop one mind.

So I believe that a practical rule of life is an outworking of Philippians 3:16, even if it is not expressly commanded in that chapter.

Now many people think of the word “rule” as a law or a restriction. And for those who have been pressured to adopt or accept a rule of life that wasn’t very good or one they didn’t like very well, the word rule can carry a lot of negative connotations. Such people are hesitant to make rules or policies because they are afraid that they will get trapped by it.

But to those who voluntarily choose a rule of life (either one of their own making or the rule of a community) the term “rule of life” can feel very positive.

If we think of the word “rule” as a structure on which to grow, it becomes something very valuable. Without a trellis for support, climbing vines and branches never reach their fullest potential.

When viewed from this perspective who wouldn’t want a rule of life?

I believe that we as individuals can benefit from a personal rule of life.

For example, Maybe we have purposed to read the Bible every day, not eat too much sugar, only allow gracious words to exit our mouth, and pray before we go to bed.

I think all of us here know that such a rule of life doesn't gain us any favor with God and we don't do these things for that reason. We simply do things to help us stay focused and help us become the kind of people God wants us to be.

Now if you need help making up a personal rule of life, there are many resources available online that will help you develop your own personal rule of life.

One of these that I looked at includes help for identifying My Gifts, My Desires, My Vision, My Mission and then this resource suggests some disciplines and patterns that will help you accomplish what you perceive to be your gifts, desires, vision, and mission. And... there may be some good that comes from exercises like this.

But what if my perception of my gifts, my desires, my vision and my perceived mission are not accurate?

What if I have created a reality in my mind about myself that is not aligned with actual reality?

And what if others who know me well can see some aspects of me that I cannot see myself? Would it be good if these people who know me well could help me identify my gifts and desires and mission and suggest disciplines that they think would benefit me?

And beyond that, What if a group of people would agree to adopt certain similar disciplines and similar goals? Could more long-term good be accomplished by a group of people working together for a common cause, then could be accomplished by individuals all pursuing their own personal desires, personal visions, and personal missions?

I think so...

In the Protestant world there are many individuals like D.L. Moody, Billy Graham, Max Lucado, and Rick Warren who are known by millions of people. There is no arguing that these men have had a significant impact on the world. These individuals have become very well-known. But... once they are gone, very few people know anything about their faith community.

In contrast, Anabaptists have no individual names that have worldwide recognition and yet millions of people know about their faith communities.

They might not know the term Anabaptist but they know of Amish or Mennonites, or Brethren.

Recently some law professors from China have requested that I would come speak in their universities about the Bible, Religion and Law. They would like if we would weave in some history of the church and how the Anabaptists fit into all of this. They don't want me to talk about my ministry and my dreams. They want me to talk about my people and my church. Do you see the difference?

There are millions of Chinese and Muslims that know about Amish and are very interested in learning more about their beliefs and values.

Some of them were very intrigued after hearing about some Amish who forgave the man who killed their children at Nickel Mines school.

These Amish reached out to the murderer's mother in different ways and had compassion on her. A couple years ago this mother came to State College and talked about the power of forgiveness and how the Amish have invited her into their homes and helped her to heal internally.

Now when you stop and think about it, there was no individual in the Anabaptist world who popularized the idea of forgiveness in the last fifty years and that is why the Amish from Nickel Mines decided to forgive the man who killed their children.

The idea of forgiveness towards those who do us wrong, is part of a rule of life that has been kept alive in community for nearly 500 years. This doesn't happen by accident.

There have been no single persons that have kept this idea alive in the Anabaptist world.

This belief and practice was passed along through community. And community is held together from one generation to the next through a corporate rule of life and stories from the past.

All Christians have access to the same scriptures, and can read about forgiveness, but without a corporate rule of life that is centered around Jesus and his teachings, some teachings of Jesus get neglected over the years.

Over the centuries, Anabaptists and other kingdom Christians have been known for embracing a corporate rule of life. It is framed in different ways, but they make no apology for making practical applications to the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. Once an individual or group feels a need to apologize for making practical applications to scripture, they've already lost the battle. Nobody is going to be inspired to take on a corporate rule of life if those who have agreed to it are apologetic about it.

Christians for centuries have just accepted the reality that a church needs a corporate rule of life. However this has been challenged significantly in the last 100 years or so here in the West.

What many Christians today don't realize is that every church does have a corporate rule of life. Any group of people who regularly interact with each other will develop a rule of life.

Here are some examples of the kinds of things that churches may include in their rule of life.

1. "Following the benediction, everyone should make a beeline for the backdoor. If visitors are at church, at least shake their hand and ask their name before running off."
2. "Nobody in this church is allowed to talk positively about faith and works in the same sentence."
3. "Everybody in this church is expected to tithe."
4. "Nobody should judge anyone else concerning their way of life, but it is fine to judge others on doctrine."
5. "Nobody should judge anyone about anything. They should only say positive things to each other."
6. "We only compliment people at our church who dress fashionably or according to the current trends. If you dress simply and modestly, we may look at you out of the corner of our eye or simply avoid you."
7. "The Holy Spirit may lead us as a church to build a bigger auditorium or start a mission in South Africa. But he most certainly won't lead us as a church to adopt modesty standards or give direction as to how we should educate our children."
8. If you like the way we do things as a church, then you are wise, and we'll probably be glad to interact with you more.
If you don't like some aspects of our culture and our practices, then there is probably something wrong with you, not us.

With the exception of tithing, most churches would not write down rules like these. Some of these are not even communicated orally like I just said them. Yet they are communicated to each other by those who have some influence in the church.

When an individual or group of people see a corporate Rule of life as a negative thing, it hard to convince them of its importance until they learn through experience the benefits they could have had if they would have adopted a corporate Rule of life.

I find it interesting that many startup organizations and churches are hesitant to develop a rule of life when they first form. It seems they are afraid that a rule of life will obstruct creativity and individual expression. So they launch their endeavor or their church hoping that God will reach down and turn some knobs and make everything work together smoothly. They get started and then things start falling apart. Relationships get very strained. And then people begin to

realize how much grief they could have saved themselves if they would have simply established some clear expectations in the beginning.

It's sort of like two naïve people getting married.

Their thoughts during the dating relationship is all about the grand relationship they are going to have once they are married. So they get married and go on a honeymoon and everything is just wonderful. And then... the marriage hits the rocks. Some of these marriages survive and many don't. If they would have established some clear expectations while they were courting, their first years could be pleasant ones.

Many Christians think it is ok for an individual or a family to have a rule of life. But they greatly resist the idea of have a corporate rule of life that governs the lifestyle choices of those who are part of the church.

In our western world, the idea of needing to submit to someone or to a group of people goes directly against the individual mindset.

Ed Welch explains it this way,

"Americans often use variations on the phrase "self-reliance." This phrase is a notorious problem for translators. For example, in Latin America, the closest they can come is a word more like our independence" in that it is political and social, not personal. In some Asian countries the phrase makes no sense, or it is a sign of mental instability. The person should never be self-reliant, according to most Asian traditions. The person should be interdependent."

Westerners tend to emphasize individualism and when they try to join a community based church like many of us are familiar with, some find it very difficult to adjust to a Christian culture in which everyone is deferring to the group and to the group conscience.

Sometimes this individualism that we are talking about is encapsulated in families.

You've heard of autonomous congregations? An autonomous congregation functions like its own castle. Such a congregation doesn't see or feel the need for wisdom and input from others in the Body of Christ.

Well... there are also autonomous families or "castle families" who function as a unit and do not sense a need for input from other families.

Some churches consist of numerous "castle families" all coming together on Sunday to worship together. These families can worship together and have a great time, until the lords of the castles start having disputes with each other. Without a strong community bond coupled with a corporate rule of life, there is no foundation to help them weather the relational storms that come along in church life.

Since these folks have not been accustomed to meshing and submitting their family rule of life into a corporate rule of life, there is no glue to keep the group functioning together when things get tough.

Yet many people in our culture are ok with a personal rule of life, and many are fine with a family rule of life, but they are not ok with a church having a corporate rule of life that could threaten their personal interests or their family rule of life.

Now let me affirm that all three of these rules of life are good - The individual, the family, and the corporate. But these three need to work interdependently.

It is good for families to have a rule of life that gives structure to their homes, but if the family rule of life squashes the individual or if it is threatened by a corporate rule of life, than it becomes unhealthy. The same is true for the other two.

It is good for individuals to have personal disciplines by which they order their daily lives, but this shouldn't make them a hermit.

It is good to have a corporate rule of life, but the corporate rule of life should not destroy the individual or the family and simply create puppets of a system.

Some corporate rules of life do stifle health creativity and individual expression, and that is why many people react to the idea of a forming a corporate rule of life. But the problem is not the rule of life. The problem is a faulty rule of life. The question should not be, "Is a corporate rule of life good or bad?" The question should be, "What does a good corporate rule of life look like, and what does a bad corporate rule of life look like?"

So I am going to suggest some indications that a church fellowship does not have a workable and effective rule of life in place. (whether oral or written)

1. The church is experiencing constant crises, constant chaos, and a constant changing of positions.
2. Expectations are stated by the church, but adherence to these expectations is optional.
3. Expectations are made arbitrarily by certain personalities in the church (*you find this same thing in dictatorships, in autocracies, and in oligarchies*)
4. The expectations seem to work for the ethnic descendants of the group but are an unnecessary burden on those who are coming to God from other cultures and backgrounds.
5. The rule of life includes expectations that do not deal with present issues but rather the challenges of some former era.

These are all signs that a church fellowship does not have a workable and effective rule of life.

If we are not intentional about our rule of life, or if our ideas as a group are not formed by the principles of God's Kingdom, then a rule of life will emerge that does not reflect the nature and character of Jesus.

What then are some ingredients of a healthy rule of life?

1. **A rule of life should be centered around Jesus and flow out of his teachings.** The Sermon on the Mount is a good place to start.
If Jesus is not the Head, some person or some ideology will become the Head.
2. **A rule of life needs to be like a good piece of fabric. It needs to be pliable, durable, and wearable.**
The Apostle Peter says that the rule of life the Jews had was more than what they could bear and he didn't think this should be imposed on the Gentiles.
Some people think that if you make a rule, than you need to stick by it and not budge. So they don't want to make rules. But again, a rule or a structure is not the problem. A good rule gives structure and form to whatever we are doing, but it needs to be useable.
A group needs to be able to make exceptions to the rule sometimes. A group needs to show mercy and compassion sometimes. Sometimes the rule needs to be improved so that it accomplishes more things or better things.

A group needs to be able to tailor the rule of life to the demographic they are trying to reach. Are you working with people who are on public welfare programs? Then your rule of life needs to address the things they struggle with.

Are you working with urban middle class Americans? Then your rule of life might need to be tailored to address their needs.

3. **A rule of life needs to get at the root of the human heart.**

A couple years ago Ken Miller and I were visiting together and he made this comment, "Regardless of what 'rule of life' a church fellowship develops, that rule of life must get at the root of the human heart."

Too many church groups establish a “rule of life” that feeds the flesh rather than starving it to death. Whatever you feed, grows!

There are things that all of us should be giving up for the sake of the Gospel. If the folks in a church are mostly from Christian background and perhaps mostly from one ethnic background, their rule of life is likely going to make allowance for things that feed the old man rather than put the old man to death.

For example: We as Anabaptists spend quite a bit of time thinking and talking about our “Godly Heritage”. Remembering the example and sacrifice of those who have gone before us is an integral part of our rule of life.

A godly heritage is certainly something to be grateful for, but often times it becomes a source of pride. People get to the end of life and they are proud of their heritage rather than being humbled by it.

This is no good!

If we brag up the godly aspects of our heritage and can’t recognize or admit the weaknesses of our heritage, people from outside our group are going to be offended and rightly so.

(Roughly 75% of the people from non-Anabaptist background who join our churches do not stay, and one of the things that bothers them the most is the arrogance and pride they sense in us about the “successful package we’ve put together”. They feel like we think we have everything figured out and don’t need to learn from others. This is not a problem unique to Anabaptists but it is a problem nevertheless.)

So what is it that is fleshly that you and your offspring need to starve?

Everyone who comes to Christ should identify ways they need to keep from feeding the flesh in order to be a follower of Jesus.

As I just mentioned, some people need to stop idolizing their heritage. Instead of thanking God for their heritage, they worship it. Paul was very grateful for the good things his Jewish heritage gave him, but he needed to count it as dung for the sake of laying hold of the Gospel.

Some people are used to putting themselves forward and pushing themselves and their families onto the center stage. When they come to Christ, these things need to go.

Some people like to dress classy or trendy. Many conservative Anabaptist rules of life don’t address the root. Their rule of life may address certain articles of clothing but not address the spirit or the desires or the habits that govern a person’s clothing choices.

Some people are accustomed to acting as “lord’s over God’s heritage”. They see people as a resource to help them accomplish their goals in life. A good rule of life will help address such actions and attitudes.

Some people are used to spending time with people of their own age group or with people who think and act like them. They don’t know how to relate to strangers or people who think totally different from them.

A Rule of life should help people put off these things and assist them in putting on other things in their place.

4. A rule of life is to be appreciated but not worshipped.

It is possible for churches to worship their rule of life.

God says we should have no other god’s before us and that would include our rule of life.

5. A rule of life needs to address present issues.

Do you know what Satan’s plan is for you church? If not, you can identify some of what his plan is by looking at the pressure points? How is he trying to hinder your church? How is he trying to get your church defeated?

6. A rule of life should help a person release whatever he is holding onto that will hinder him from laying hold of Christ.

7. A rule of life should nourish and bolster what is good and not restrict it.

God's rules do not limit the amount of good we can do.

God does not put a limit on the number of cups of cold water we can give out in Jesus name.

God does not put a limit on the number of widows and orphans a church may support.

God does not put a limit on the number of times brothers and sisters can get together and pray.

God does not put a limit on the number of churches a brotherhood is allowed to start in one decade.

Our rule of life, whether verbal or written, should not put limits on good things. I am very sad when I hear about churches putting limits on things like this. If there are people who have the time, and the ability, and the character to do certain things, we should encourage this.

A church can and should give direction as to how these things are done assuming those responsible for decision making are not being guided by fear or selfishness.

If a church notices that the way cold water is being distributed is bringing glory to man instead of to God, then it needs to address this and give direction as to how it needs to be done, rather than forbidding the distribution of cups of cold water.

If prayer meetings are causing dissension and division in the body, then address that. Don't forbid prayer meetings. If a sending church is starting new churches and the new churches are making provision for the flesh or if its leaders are using them as a place to throw their weight around, then address that. A rule of life should not dampen or hinder the starting of new churches.

(Now there is the problem of trying to do more than we can or should but that is quite a different problem.)

8. **A good rule of life addresses a wide variety of things**, not just clothing. It addresses finances. It addresses vocations. It addresses education. It addresses spiritual disciplines.

9. **A good rule of life is not forced upon people.**

People need to choose it voluntarily. People need to embrace it.

When people join an Order or a monastery, there is a period of time where they can experience living under the rule to see if this is something they are willing to submit to. People who come into our churches need the same opportunity.

And if someone decides our rule of life doesn't work for them, I don't think we should censure them.

If we see they are willing to live an upright Christian life, I believe they should still be respected as a member of the body of Christ.

10. **A good rule of life addresses the direction a person is headed rather than just being a list of lines in the sand beyond which no one may cross.**

If we draw many lines in the sand and say, "nobody can cross these lines", it is then easy for our time and energy to be consumed in policing the line rather than using the rule of life to picture the direction we want to head as a church.

I think this last point is very important so let's think about this together.

There are of course some lines in the sand that the scriptures make, and on these things we must draw a line also. But when Jesus came to walk among us, he helped us understand that the thoughts and motives that make people cross moral lines are just as wrong as crossing the moral line.

So if a church addresses the infraction of a particular rule, (particularly a rule made by people) there are going to be folks who say, "But this is a man-made rule." Or they might say, "You shouldn't be calling me into account for such minor infractions. You should be focusing on things that really matter."

(Now a person with such an attitude may not respond any better if you address the direction they are headed, but they might. At least you if you address the direction they are headed, you are getting at the heart and at the root of the matter rather than simply addressing the symptoms or the fruit.)

Judges who sentence people to prison, send them to prison for breaking the law. But many judges will also go ahead and lecture the criminal for his motives and his character. Criminals don't usually appreciate judges more if the judge exposes their motives and character in front of the whole courtroom. But if the judge is correct in his judgment, the criminal has a lot more to think about when he gets to prison, and it may be the thing that helps him see himself for who he really is.

So one benefit of addressing the direction a person is headed is that the Holy Spirit may prick a person's conscience in a way that couldn't be done if you had simply addressed their behavior.

When it comes to developing a rule of life on things that the scripture does not command in plain language (things like women wearing dresses, not baptizing people until a certain age, living close to each other in community, avoiding TV, etc.) I'm proposing that when we communicate our "standards" or our rule of life to people, we should picture for them the direction we want to head as a group and the direction we don't want to head as a group.

If it involves clothing, or vehicles, or houses, or vocations, provide some pictures (or at least some word pictures) that will help people understand both what we appreciate and also what we believe is a departure from what God wants from us as a church.

In between these two "pictures" (the direction we want to head and the direction we do not want to go) is a gray area that we would neither affirm as a church nor censure as a church. We give some room for latitude for people of different persuasions and different upbringings.

So a second benefit of this proposal is that all of us are human and some of us pay attention to detail more than others.

If you draw a lot of lines in the sand, some people are not going to know that they crossed the line. This is particularly true for converts who did not grow up with the rule of life as part of their culture. If you draw lines in the sand, you are going to need to constantly be telling converts where they have crossed a line and this could be discouraging to them.

At the same time, there could be people who grew up in the culture who know just how far they can go and still be inside the line and a line in the sand is likely not going to help them see the motivations of their hearts.

Two people can behave the very same way, but be headed in opposite directions.

I am much more comfortable interacting with people who haven't yet adopted all the Christian values and practices that I think are helpful, and yet are headed in that general direction, than what I am with people who appear to have historic Christian values by the way they dress and talk, but are really in the process of losing these historic Christian values.

A third benefit of this proposal is that it would lessen the need for conservative Anabaptists to separate from each other whenever some in the group suggest that a line in the sand be improved or eliminated.

There have been so many divisions and schisms in the conservative Anabaptist world the last 50 years over such trivial things. Drawing lots of lines in the sand has been the cause of a proliferation of new conferences and fellowships all over this continent. New groups that are splitting off of other groups are hesitant to join an established group because they don't like the lines in the sand the established group has.

If a church fellowship has a rule of life with many lines drawn in the sand, there is going to be a certain percentage of folks who are going to feel a need to separate from anyone who proposes that the line in the sand be handled differently. That is just how we as humans are. Removing a line or making exceptions for people who are coming to God, feels to them like a compromise. And granted, there are many situations where it is a compromise.

But just because it is a compromise in some situations does not mean it is always a compromise to redraw or

eliminate a line in the sand. Sometimes the line drawn in the sand was a problem from the very beginning and the sooner it is gone, the better it will be for everyone.

Even though getting rid of lines in the sand is often a sign of moving away from God or from his principles it is not always the case. (Read the book of Acts and Revelation 2 and 3 for some examples of both.)

Take for example the common Anabaptist prohibition against watching TV.

This rule works quite well for Anabaptists, except for those with tender consciences who look at the screen when they go to the doctor's office.

But think about new believers who do not grow up in a godly home, and who may continue to live with other family members who have the TV going all the time. What is the new believer supposed to do?

In Anabaptist settings, the whole family is normally part of the church and so it seems logical to say, "no watching TV."

But then a church planter who grew up with a prohibition against watching TV, starts interacting with new converts, and decides this prohibition doesn't work, and so he may decide to do away with this rule when he plants a church.

But does it have to be one way or the other? Do we have to choose between "No rule of life" and "A rule of life that only works for conservative Christians?"

If a church was creative, couldn't their rule of life address the TV subject for everybody without putting a new believer in an untenable position? Maybe we could make "not watching TV" a spiritual discipline rather than a prohibition.

These are the kinds of issues that I would like for us to be able to work on at these forums in the coming years. How can we form a rule of life that works in a multi-cultural setting? What does a good rule of life look like in Greece? In Africa? In Asia?

The church I am a part of has a statement of common practice that describes the way those who are part of our church try to live our lives. A person could view this as a "church standard" I suppose if they wished. But we view it more as a description of how most of us live. We don't spell out a lot of specifics on dress like many Anabaptist churches do, however we do cover more topics in our statement of practice than what many churches do.

Because our statement does not give a lot of specifics on the particular patterns of clothing we expect, some of us have put together some pictures of what we consider acceptable attire and pictures of attire that is headed in a direction we don't want to head as a church. We did this to help us as a church understand where we are headed, and to help us be more unified in what we communicate to our potential converts.

Now if you present to a group of people, the direction you want to head as a church, and the direction you don't want to head, there will likely be an individual or so in the group who is going to look at this and say, "Why do we have to identify the direction we don't want to head? Why can't we just identify the direction we do want to head?"

I've pondered this for some time.

Should we only identify the direction we want to head and let people make their own conclusions about what is not appropriate in our church?

The New Testament does both. The early church does both. So I think it is good for us to do both also.

I also think it depends a lot on the person and how well he or she has gotten to know us.

There are sincere Christians who have been taking steps in a more conservative or scriptural direction, who may feel discouraged if they think they have been taking huge steps in the right direction, and then we tell them that their current practice is not good enough for us or is not the direction we want to head.

At the same time, I know of people who were quite offended that there were ways they were not meeting the community expectations, and they didn't know for a year or two. So it is good to communicate. Find out. You could

say something like, “We as a community have certain things we expect of each other. If you want to be part of us, we can sit down some evening and talk about these expectations.” Communication in these matters is so important.

In conclusion:

1. Drawing lines in the sand is a way for leaders to get some sleep at night.
Talking to people about the direction they are headed will probably create more work, at least in the short term, but in the long term, I think it will result in less work and a more vibrant fellowship, if it is done in a Christ like way.
2. Our rule of life as a congregation or church must flow out of our love for God and our love for our neighbor. Without these two foundations in place, people are not going to want to go to church with us anyhow. But if there is love and there is respect for other people and cultures, people are willing to give up all sorts of things if they sense an opportunity to be part of a fellowship of believers that has a spiritual future. If God is changing the lives of individuals and families, and there is a growing church fellowship with a God-honoring rule of life, I believe that many people will want to be part of this.

May God help us in this!

Ernest Eby – 2017 CPFR Colloquy