

Modifying The Pattern

While I was growing up on the farm during the Great Depression, my mother and my three sisters had little ready-to-wear clothes to choose from in the local dry goods store and no money with which to buy clothes. Mom made their clothes. She seldom could afford a pattern but she was creative enough to make her own.

One pattern did not fit the size and shape of each of the four. So they were modified to accommodate each one. This also required enlarging the patterns as they grew.

Since God is the builder of the church, he did not give us a pattern for building it as though that were to be our job. Neither did he set out an outline, pattern, form, agenda or routine for us to follow when we meet, worship, and work together. Some guidelines and warnings concerning decorum were given in Paul's writings to correct inconsiderate abuses in assemblies, but only by our fallacious logic and the twisting of Scripture can we make those into a pattern. That has not kept us from trying to fit activities into some perceived pattern.

If there is a pattern set forth which we are obliged to restore, at what point can we be confident that we have reinstated it? In my years of acquaintance in the Church of Christ, our procedures and practices have continued to be modified.

Before I came on the scene, meetings were begun in homes in our cotton patch community in West Texas. There were no elders, deacons, or organization. Just disciples meeting, though elders and deacons were selected later. If the little group was serving God acceptably before reaching the point of selecting elders and deacons, then their appointment is no necessary part of a pattern. In all due respect, the elders were not always spiritual giants. After my brother, George, and I graduated from college, he wanted to go (and did) to Africa in mission work. He sought help from our home congregation only to be told by an elder that he needed to stay at home and support his family for those people did not have souls.

In my earliest remembrances, the congregation met only on Sunday mornings – if/when people could get there. My family went five miles by wagon. No one was thought to be forsaking the assembly when meetings were missed. In fact, there is no Scriptural instruction for us to meet each and every Sunday, as we have thought to prove by our illogic and bound as a legal specification. That does not mean that fellowship with others in gatherings is unimportant. It just takes it out of the legal pattern category. And yes, there were also those “gospel meetings” of two weeks length during the moonlight nights of August when the crops were laid by. That seemed to satisfy the need for assembling back then. Rarely was anyone ever baptized except during those meetings with an imported evangelist, who was advertised sometimes as *Elder John Doe*.

With the advent of the automobile and better roads came the idea of having Sunday evening services. Sunday morning Bible classes were initiated with the partitioning of the auditorium by thin curtains hanging from wires crisscrossing the room. Some uninspired literature consisting of a 3” x 4” card with a picture, text, memory verse, and comments began to be used for little children's classes. And then some began to modify the pattern to include Wednesday evening meetings. These were often referred to as prayer meeting services though they were for Bible study, for prayer was not the big

thing for us. Evening meetings were always at “dark-thirty” after the farmers had time to milk their cows, feed their animals, and coop the chickens for the night.

It is amazing how quickly this modified pattern became obligatory on everyone under threat of hell, or at least the prospect of loss of some stars from the anticipated crown. When the elders added these meetings, since we are to obey the elders (we were warned), we were forsaking the assembly when we failed to put these meetings in our schedules. Never mind that one’s work schedule did not fit; just get a different job in order to put the kingdom first!

In those assemblies, two glasses were used for the communion, and money was *laid by in store* on the *communion table* by the giver or a child during the last song. Eventually, the collection was taken by the servers in close association with the communion. The collection trays were passed without prayer. Call was made from the floor without advance notice for those to lead prayers and serve the congregation. Prayers were memorized with little variation. No one dared to take a chief seat by sitting on the podium. Women had long hair, and many wore some sort of hat as a veil. And only a show-off young song leader would beat time by waving his hand. The song leader always led from the floor rather than the podium, for that was the holy ground of the preacher. The morning sermon was aimed at believers but evening lessons were more for the outsiders. The meeting house bore no sign.

A rather inflexible pattern of procedure developed comprising of three songs, a prayer, a song, the sermon, the communion and collection combined, a song, and a dismissal prayer with very little allowance for informality or spontaneity. The song leader offered no comments more than announcing, “Number 89” or “Let’s try singing number 37.” No scripture reading. No communion comments. On rare occasions, the one serving at the table would add some remarks about the preacher’s sermon. This practice was disparaged as *half-soling* the sermon.

There was no “placing of membership” or roll of the faithful. Withdrawal of fellowship was unknown. I do not recall the congregation ever having a church social or fellowship meal either in or out of the building. Many families went home with each other for dinner (*lunch* to you uninitiated). The outdoor outhouse and outdoor baptistry were updated into indoor facilities in a later building, along with a water fountain and a kitchen with an area for social fellowship, especially for serving bereaved families.

Local talent was used for most of the preaching even though the house full of members could have supported a full-time man. During my teenage years, “preacher boys” from ACC came up from Abilene each weekend to fill the pulpit, making full use of N. B. Hardeman’s *Tabernacle Sermons*. Use of blackboards and charts by preachers was common, and all Scripture references were quoted by memory rather than being read. Later, *located preachers* were employed, a parsonage was bought to house them, and an office was provided for them.

Fifth-Sunday contributions often went to support a home for orphans, and home-canned foods were collected for pickup when the truck from the home made its rounds.

In those times, we had not picked up on the Catholic concept of a *church* wedding. I never knew of a formal wedding until I was out of college and preaching.

Having no funeral home then, the body of the deceased remained in the home (where most deaths occurred) until time for the funeral. Someone always sat with the

body. All singing at funerals was congregational, and usually songs were sung at the graveside also. Songs like *In The Sweet Bye and Bye, Shall We Gather At The River,* and *God Be With You Till We Meet Again*” still live in my memory as I visualize our farm neighbors expressing hope in an earthly farewell. Then in a solemn task the men took turns with spades filling the grave and shaping the dirt into a peaked ridge while everyone watched.

But this is not just nostalgia. We are reviewing the development and expansion of a pattern in our congregations. Just as clothing patterns change to accommodate succeeding styles and changes of fabric in fitting a living, growing person, so change is necessary in meeting the needs of a growing, living body of God’s people as their circumstances change.

As I went through my teenage years, the congregation added a young people’s meeting before the evening service and a ladies’ Bible class during the week. Participation in these was not obligatory, but it was strongly encouraged.

As similar changes developed in various congregations, each adaptation was met with criticism and debate. Brother set himself against brother. Those whose consciences were violated by use of Bible classes, women teachers, uninspired literature, or individual communion glasses felt compelled to separate themselves for sake of conscience. Thus divisions were made involving different combinations of these issues. As time went on, those who believed in a premillennial reign of Christ on earth and those who opposed cooperation of congregations in supporting projects also left and formed their own groups. These were the sad results of well-meaning efforts to find a specified pattern and to follow it. There is enough blame for these divisions to go around to all parties involved.

As Christ’s living body in a changing society on earth has continued, more adaptations have become effective. Now some groups have vocational staffs consisting of secretaries, evangelists, ministers, counselors, and custodians. Replacing blackboards and charts, dramatic skits are employed to enforce lessons, as are also various kinds of screen projections. Special programs adapted to the level of the children are common. Congregations have outreach by mail, radio, television, printed materials, and the internet. Literature written by women writers is used, and women are serving in more capacities, even being deaconesses in a few churches. Our preaching has become more Christ-centered and less doctrinal and church-centered. Greater appreciation for grace and less confidence in our works is nurtured. More attention is being given to prayer and praise. Special singing groups upbuild us with inspiring spiritual songs. Some congregations no longer use the American traditional *invitation song*. After generations of formal silence by the audience, *amens*, applause, clapping, and spontaneous outbursts are being heard, and some lift up hands in prayer expressed in word or song.

It would be too idealistic to expect that adaptations in our generation would meet with more favor than those of the generation before. There will always be those who resist any change. Their previous experience and conditioning make some resistant to any adaptations. So they go back to the Scriptures using the illogic of previous generations to find some sort of pattern that is being violated. The Scriptures are ransacked for prooftexts supportive of their contentions.

No one can make a consistent claim that congregations anywhere do all and only what first century churches did. Any effort to reinstate all and only what they did then would make us seem quaint, outdated, and unappealing in our generation, except to those of cultish mind. The emphasis would be on forms rather than spirituality.

Here I will copy some from my third book, *Free As Sons*, page, 75: “The church was begun and nurtured by persons exercising special spiritual gifts, including the speaking in tongues. Women wore veils while praying and prophesying. Destitute widows were enrolled as special servants. Other women were deaconesses also. Evangelists spread the gospel, while teachers, prophets, and elders taught the saints. Gatherings of the saints were more of a horizontal outreach than vertical. In gatherings, they prayed, sang, communed, and enjoyed fellowship meals. The first church held possessions in common, and the only collections that we read of were for the poor and for evangelism. No mention is made of a budget, a corporate treasury, or of continued, weekly collections. No name was worn to designate the church. Racial discrimination was not tolerated. They laid hands on appointees, and on the sick, whom they anointed with oil. They fasted. The kiss of love was enjoined. Jesus gave both an example and a command to wash feet, which thing was a virtue of the worthy widow. Jewish disciples kept rituals of the Law of Moses. There was no command or precedent for church-owned property, weekly communion, orphanages, corporate trustees, paid congregational personnel (except elders), *placing membership*, the class system of teaching, hymnals, or four-part harmony.

“As you well know, none of our congregations practice all of those things that the early church practiced, and all of our churches practice some things not practiced then. Which of these things are parts of the *simple New Testament pattern*? By which of those marks is the church to be identified today?” Please read that entire chapter.

As I have detailed in this discourse, most of what identifies us in churches of Christ has developed in my lifetime. Now, we ask you who seek to restore a pattern, have we at any point restored that elusive *simple New Testament pattern* that is supposed to exist? If it has been restored, at what point was it accomplished, and have we modified it more? If it has not been restored, what is lacking in addition to our present state? Is any modifying of it permissible? Have all who have died before it was accomplished been lost? Are all of us who might have restored it and then added other features guilty and hopeless? If you cannot answer these questions definitely and honestly, why make a fuss over it? If restoring a pattern is a life-or-death issue, you surely must know the details of it!

Any perceived pattern one might have deduced from the Scriptures is modified! If it is subject to continued modification, it ceases to be a pattern. God could have given in one paragraph in the Scriptures a list of congregational procedures and practices to be followed, but he did not choose to do so. He left it to our wisdom to adapt these things to fit our needs rather than to follow forms to fit a pattern. []