

According To The Pattern

In time, the original plea of the Stone-Campbell Movement **to restore the unity** of the church was directed toward the restoration of **the church itself**. We have sought to restore an organic structure identifiable by a pattern found in the New Testament writings.

Being Biblical in our teachings, we often quoted our proof-text for patternism: “*See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you in the mountain*” (Heb. 8:5). When we observe this passage in its context, however, our misapplication of it becomes evident, and this mistaken scent has sent us searching on the wrong trail. God was establishing a legal system which included the tabernacle with its detailed rituals. Having given Moses complete instruction, God cautioned that he follow the pattern given in constructing the tabernacle.

Although the tabernacle was a type of the church, we do not fulfill the type of Moses. Jesus did that. The true tent (tabernacle) was built by the Lord. The writer of Hebrews (8:2) informs us that our high priest is a “*minister of the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord.*”

No blueprint was given to us, and Jesus needed no pattern. How did he build it? The gospel was preached. People believed and obeyed it. The Lord saved those people, making such a part of the sum of the saved, which is his church — his congregation. That had nothing to do with patterns or structures.

We have spoken of the church restoring the pattern of the ancient gospel plan of salvation; but, the church has done no such thing; the ancient gospel produces the church. Without that gospel there would be no saved/church.

On Pentecost, the church was not identified by name, organization, worship, or purpose. Such things, at best, are only secondary. A “restoration” of those things is no part of restoring the church. The church which the Lord built is a universal, unstructured entity which defies limiting patterns. It is produced by the gospel, not restored by it. We tend to think in terms of structures and programs when we should be thinking of the entity. We build structures, but the Lord builds the church by saving people. He has not commissioned us to build it, either “according to the pattern” or otherwise. I cannot add one person to it.

Jesus did not build an identifiable, patterned structure and then start adding the saved to it. The Lord saved 3,000 people on Pentecost and added them together; he kept adding the saved day by day; and he is still adding them today. This activity has nothing to do with a patterned, corporate group. And the Lord has not called upon us to restore a patterned organization so he can add the saved to it.

Perhaps, you agree that the above is true regarding the church at large, but you may contend that there must be some organizational structure on the congregational level, and that the group must be identified by its pattern. In response to such a contention, I would say, first of all, that the

Lord does not add one to the local congregational group either. He adds us to his body at large when he saves us.

The Unstructured Church

Must we structure congregations according to a pattern? Let us examine the matter. We read of elders and deacons in the church. Are they essential before a group may be identified as a church? Many of our congregations have neither elders nor deacons. Is it sinful to be in such a group? Is the group composed of saved people? Considering that it has not followed an organizational pattern, is it really a church? Would choosing elders and deacons change the identity or spiritual state of the group? Must it be an independent, autonomous group? Then, how do we explain that in the Jerusalem church there were many groups meeting in homes (house to house); yet, we do not read of a plurality of churches in Jerusalem? Surely, the many thousands of disciples in Jerusalem were not of one congregation, but they all composed the church in Jerusalem. Any organizational blueprint is blurred as we look at the Jerusalem church.

The scriptures speak of elders and deacons in the church, but they also speak of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, ministers, deaconesses, and enrolled widows who served. Does the blueprint say that a congregation must have all of these? No? Then, which ones must be included in order to follow the “simple New Testament pattern” of organization and function? And what are the precise functions of each? There is endless debate among us about this “simple pattern” by some of us who do not even know the difference between a minister and a preacher. If this pattern is so easily discernible, why haven’t we, and all the other God-fearing people of the ages, been able to see it? God could have spelled this all out with definitions, laws, and regulations, but he did not see fit to do so. The lack of definitive information seems to place a lack of emphasis on organization and permits the disciples in different circumstances to organize their corporate functions in the manner best suited to their needs. God places no man or structure of men between the disciple and himself. There are no lords or mediating priests.

The church was begun and nurtured by men 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 model 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 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 of the 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?

Our sincere, constant debate over what the essential pattern consists of has resulted in many divisions. Our emphasis of details of lesser significance has caused us to destroy one of the primary, essential qualities of the church — its oneness, its unity.

No Pattern Given

Where do the scriptures outline an exclusive and inclusive pattern for local organization or of the activities to be carried on when the group meets together? There are instructions and example for the saints to assemble for edification, but no prescribed pattern is given for those meetings which give the details of an agenda. Disciples may assemble to discuss the business and work of the group, to praise and teach in song, to pray, to eat together, to teach the scriptures, to commune, to deliver one of their number to Satan, to mourn and bury their dead, to celebrate a wedding, to select and appoint their elders or deacons, or for any other activity which they consider to be of benefit to the group or individuals. They might assemble for any one of those activities, or for a number of them, at any particular gathering. No specified pattern is set forth for such assemblies, nor are they required on specified days, nor must they be at “the church building.”

Even the teaching and admonishing to be accomplished by psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs is not a part of a blueprint for “worship services,” as we commonly describe our assemblies for edification. These exhortations to sing are given in context with other exhortations toward proper social conduct, rather than in context with “worship services.” The context includes exhortations to husbands, wives, parents, children, and slaves and in “whatever you do, in word or deed.” In their social gatherings, instead of singing the songs of the drinking party under the influence of intoxicating spirits, they were exhorted to be filled with the Spirit and to upbuild each other with spiritual songs. If you are inclined to reject this, please read Ephesians 5-6 and Colossians 3 again. Be honest with yourself!

Which congregations among us use the Jerusalem church as a pattern? The Jerusalem church selected deacons without elders. We read of elders there later, but not “elders of the churches.” Even though the disciples met in different groups, church is always mentioned in the singular. Then, we have the elders meeting jointly with the apostles to make a decision to be effective far beyond their own congregation or congregations. These elders made decisions for the church in Antioch! In our search for a pattern, we have evaded these points. Let me help you with an evasion!

As Oliver Howard, in a class at the Pepperdine Lectures, points out, these elders in Jerusalem were not the elected type of elder that we read of later. They were elders of the historic Jewish concept as are mentioned in the Gospels. Among the Jews, those who were referred to as elders were the heads of prominent families, men of reputation and influence whom the people respected for leadership in their communities. They were not elected to an authoritative position, but they only lent their influence through their decisions as leaders. The contribution for the poor was given to them to ensure an honest distribution of it. In the letter to the church in

Antioch and among the Gentiles, they were making no authoritative decree, but they were saying in effect: “We, as reputable leaders among the Jews who have accepted Christ, approve of this declaration that circumcision and the Law of Moses cannot be bound as a condition of salvation.”

Surely, we must look to the New Testament writings for guidance in all that we do, whether in forming a congregation, a marriage, a business, a labor union, a school, or anything else. The question is: Is there an essential pattern to be followed by which the church is identified? If so, where is the pattern? Must there be a command for each detail? Or, are all historical details and facts of equal value as patterns? Are all of those historical details necessary examples, or are there some unnecessary ones? Are some just incidental? Are we given some sort of jigsaw puzzle of historical details, with some extras thrown in and some blanks to be filled in, that we must piece together correctly under the threat of hell?

Selectivity

Out of all the things which we enumerated earlier that are taught and exemplified in the historical record, we have been very selective in choosing for a pattern. We rule certain ones out on the grounds that they were either special, temporary, or cultural. Other practices which are neither commanded or exemplified are accepted on the grounds of expediency. Since we all take such liberties in our selectivity, we have no right to be critical of others whose method of choosing does not coincide with ours. Those who bind weekly communion, support orphanages, and hire ministers because of expediency have no just ground for condemning those who retain deaconesses and tongue speaking because of example. Since all follow their sincere understanding in discerning what is right in these matters, it is not fitting that one reject the other.

Patternism is another facet of legalism, a seeking to find holy, sacramental rituals through which we maintain righteousness and an official, mediatorial organization through which we work our righteousness, and by which we are kept in controlled conformity. It encroaches on our individual freedom in serving God. It would make our individual relationship with God dependent upon an organizational relationship. Disciples are parts of the community of believers, but that fellowship is not an organization. Our participation in spiritual activities of a corporate group is for mutual upbuilding rather than for a high priestly function of the structure through which we approach God.

As I review my teaching in many years of my ministry, I am dismayed to realize the emphasis which I put on following the correct pattern which actually took the focus off of Christ, his grace, and our personal relationship with him. Endless discussion of supposed legal correctness of pattern has dimmed our view of him who saved us from such a yoke of legalistic specifications. []

(Cecil Hook; This is a reprint of Chapter 20 of my book, [*Free As Sons*](#).)