

RETAINING THE PATTERN

By David Phillips

The church, as we read of it in the New Testament, is a masterpiece of divine planning. The role that it plays in the spiritual realm is a testament to God's manifold wisdom and His awesome power (Eph. 3:10-11). The church is spoken of as being the temple of God (Eph. 3:16). As such, it is being built by Christ Himself (Matt. 16:18). Individuals who are added to the Lord's church are said to be "*as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (1 Pet. 2:5). It is the perfect organization to fulfill the Lord's work on this earth.

Rejecting the Pattern

Many praise God for His love in sending Jesus to the earth (John 3:16). However, few praise Him for the wisdom which is manifest through the establishment and organization of the church. How so? In the Scriptures, Christ delivered a specific pattern for the organization of the local church: Apostles, prophets (in the N.T. Scriptures), evangelists, pastors and teachers, deacons (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:12). Having given organization to the local church, the Lord intended for it to fulfill a specific purpose: Equip the saints, do the work of ministry, edify the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). No other organization and no other mission were given for the church. Yet, rather than praising God for the simplicity and effectiveness of His pattern, men throughout history have sought ever diligently to deviate from that pattern (1 Cor. 1:21; 2 Cor. 11:3).

Between the second and third centuries A.D., leaders in certain churches began organizing themselves into regional groups, contrary to the pattern found in the Scriptures (1 Pet. 5:2). This joining of local churches into districts was pursued under the guise of unifying the church. The desire for unity among churches during that time was based on Paul's teaching on the unity (Eph. 4:2-3). However, many of the church leaders did not believe that God's pattern in the New Testament was sufficient to retain that unity in light of severe persecution and doctrinal heresies. Eventually those regional organizations came together in one unified denomination where one man would rule as head of the church on earth. That organization became known as the Catholic Church or church universal. During this same period the Greek Orthodox Church was developing parallel to the Catholic Church. Yet, in spite of their doctrinal differences, both groups failed to put their trust in the divine pattern for the church. Thus, denominationalism was born.

There are records of men throughout the centuries who have seen the evils of denominationalism and its subsequent doctrines, but their influence seems to have been relatively minor until the time of Martin Luther (1483-1546 A.D.) and Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531 A.D.). Beginning with these two, there has been a host of well-intentioned men seeking to establish patterns which, in their minds, were more in-tune with the biblical pattern. The majority of these men, however, merely left one human pattern to

start another. The methods of the Wesleyans (Methodist Church), the Calvinism of the Baptist Church, the physical restraints of the Mennonites and Amish, etc. All of these established different patterns, but none truly returned to the one found in the New Testament.

Returning to the Pattern

During the early 19th century men who had been members of various denominations began to see that the only way to truly live as the Lord's church was to "Speak where the bible speaks, and be silent where the Bible is silent." This desire for Bible authority in all things was based on God's emphasis to "*speak as the oracles of God*" (1 Pet. 4:11), and to not go beyond "*the doctrine of Christ*" (2 John 9). This is the attitude that faithful Christians had during the first century A.D. Though its influence seems almost unnoticed in the shadow of the denominations, this attitude has characterized the Lord's church throughout history, and it characterizes His church today.

Repeating the Cycle

Why is it important that we make ourselves aware of the history of the church as seen above? History has a tendency to repeat itself. In as much as men in the second and third centuries failed to put their faith in God's divine pattern, men today are following in their footsteps. The Catholic and Orthodox churches were organized because men had lost their faith in the divine plan. This same lack of faith is prevalent in many churches of Christ today. How so?

The Bible teaches that the church makes known the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10). The denominations, on the other hand, believe that the *local church is insufficient* to fulfill the Lord's mission. Therefore, they seek to unite all local churches under one earthly head. Likewise, some members in the church of Christ today believe that the local church alone is insufficient for "*going into all the world*" (Mark 16:15). Therefore, they seek to establish "mother churches" and/or "societies" to facilitate world-wise missions. Rather than local churches supporting individual preachers, groups of congregations are joining themselves together in sort of a micro-denomination, creating an organization over and above the local church.

The Bible teaches that the mission of the church is limited to equipping the saints, ministry, and edifying the body of Christ. The denominations, on the other hand, believe that *God's pattern* for the mission of the church is *insufficient*. Therefore, they make it their mission to delve into matters of civil government (the Catholic Church was and still is one of the strongest forces in the Roman government), provide secular education (many high-ranking universities were established by denominations), and to enter a slue of other business ventures. Likewise, some members of the church of Christ believe that in order to "keep up with the denominations," the church too must expand its mission beyond the biblical pattern. As a result, throughout the U.S. there are many schools which claim to be "church of Christ schools." There are orphan homes which are run and funded mainly by churches of Christ. Hospitals, both in the U.S. and in foreign countries, are being labeled as "church of Christ hospitals." Many churches have taken it upon themselves to provide activities and entertainment for the youth. And the list goes on.

Knowing from where we have come is essential because it helps us to avoid the mistakes made by past generations. But when Christians do not learn from others who have departed from God's pattern, then they are bound to make the same mistakes. This very truth is being played out in many of churches in the world today.

Retaining the Pattern

Concerning false teachers, Jesus said, "*You will know them by their fruits*" (Matt. 15:16). An apple tree produces apples, not oranges. A plum tree produces plums, not pineapples. The Lord's church produces the fruit which God defines, not the fruit of men. Just as false teachers are known by their fruits, false churches are known by theirs. A church that is of Christ is not known by its name, it is not known by its building, it is not known by its size. Rather, it is known by whether or not it retains the pattern delivered in the pages of the New Testament. Any church that is not willing to retain the New Testament pattern must take heed. "*Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch*" (Matt. 15:13-14).

The Son of God dying on the cross seems foolish to the world, but it was God's plan (1 Cor. 1:18). Church autonomy seems foolish to the dominations, but it is God's plan. Likewise, leaving local churches to do their work seems foolish to those who want to institutionalize the church, but the sufficiency of the local church to do its work is God's plan. God chose the foolish things of this world to accomplish His will and to put to shame the wise and mighty things of the world (1 Cor. 1:21, 27). Do we truly believe that we can accomplish the Lord's will by heeding the wisdom of men rather than His specific instructions? (1 Sam. 15:22-23)

If we want to be a tree that God has planted and if we want to bear the fruit which God has defined, then let us set aside our human pride and diligently strive to retain God's divine pattern. Liberal minded brethren may scoff at the simplicity of God's plan for His church, but those who put their faith in the power of God rather than the power of human invention will be made known when Christ comes. Are you willing to retain the pattern?

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Avondale church of Christ
1606 Glen Willow Rd., P.O. Box 421, Avondale, PA 19311
(610) 268-2088
www.avondalechristians.com