**The Church Has a Pattern for Action Though Some Deny It**

*by Harry Osborne*

Preaching in local work for 40 years, one experiences good times and bad times. The good times of seeing people respond to the Lord in obeying the gospel never cease to thrill my soul. Seeing congregations grow in zeal for evangelism, strength in edification and every manifestation of love for one another produces a deep appreciation for the power of the gospel and an abiding joy (cf. 3 Jn. 3-4). The relationships that develop with our brothers and sisters in Christ become sources of encouragement and affection that touch the heart deeply – often even beyond that of the physical family. However, the bad times of deep grief are also a part of that work, especially when I see souls walk away from the principles once believed and, as a result, depart from fellowship once enjoyed (1 Jn. 2:19; 2 Jn. 9). Just like the good times never cease to lift my spirits, such bad times never cease to bring sorrow and a reflection on what might have been done differently to avoid the loss. My daily prayer for this and every other congregation with whom I have labored is that God would help and strengthen us so that all would be gathered before His throne in the end, without the loss of a single soul.

For the past couple of weeks, I have seen statements on social media from a former member of this congregation who left several years ago. Problems at that time led to the departure, though efforts were made to edify and correct, and the same was repeated with the next congregation. It was with sadness, though not surprise, that I read from this individual: “I am a "liberal" now. (By which I mean I am part of an ‘institutional church.’)” Several statements that followed showed a caustic and derisive misrepresentation of the teaching and attitude of faithful brethren. I will not respond in kind, but would like to examine the substance of the reason given for the change. The basic point was given in the following claims, quoted without any alteration:

“The purpose of the new testament is not to make churches that conform to the pattern. It is to make Christians that conform to The Pattern.”

“Curious thing, this word pattern *[in 1 Pet. 2:21, also translated “example” – hro]*. We are to \*pattern\* our lives after Jesus' 'hupogrammos.' This is never said of the local church.”

“The right name: church of Christ. The right organization: elders, deacons and saints. The right work: that which the new testament says: edification of the saints, benevolence to the saints, and preaching the gospel. The right worship: the 5 acts-singing praying giving preaching and the Lord's supper. In the church of Christ, we have this tradition of telling people how to find the True Church. Yet, Jesus gives only 1 qualification: John 13:35 This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

What does the New Testament teach us about how we follow Christ as our example and whether He has left a pattern for the church to follow? Yes, Jesus is our ultimate example as the sinless One who showed perfect obedience and became the Giver of all truth (Heb. 4:15; 5:7-9; 12:24; Jn. 1:14; 14:6). But how did He impart that truth? Are we only to look at the example He set in actions while on earth? Should we add to that the things specifically stated about Him through the remainder of the New Testament? Is there something more involved in following Jesus?

On the night before His crucifixion, our Lord told His disciples they would not be left alone, but He would send the Holy Spirit to guide them in the truth man must know and obey (Jn. 14:14-21). Though Jesus had declared some of that truth to His disciples while in His earthly ministry, the Holy Spirit was to teach them all things (Jn. 14:25-26). Our Lord said:

*“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you”* (Jn. 16:12-14).

With that promise of the Holy Spirit to reveal all truth to them, Jesus instructed:

*“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”* (Matt. 28:18-20).

So, when those inspired by the Holy Spirit reveal and instruct us in Acts through Revelation, they are teaching us to obey all things which are commanded by Jesus. Can we claim Jesus is our example while not obeying what He taught through His inspired apostles? Certainly not! If we love Jesus, we will accept that truth and obey it (Jn. 14:15, 21, 23). Peter said that the inspired writings of Paul were “Scripture” (2 Pet. 3:16). And what is the purpose of Scripture? The answer is clear and plain: *“****All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is******profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work****”* (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Paul claimed that revelation provided a “**pattern of sound words**” to which we must “***hold fast***” (2 Tim. 1:13). Was that meant only for our individual life? No, for Paul instructed Titus to “set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you” (Titus 1:6). Pray tell, how could Titus set in order the things lacking in the church if Christ gave no pattern for the church jointly, but only individuals? And what were those elders of the church to do? They were to be *“holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict”* (Titus 1:9). From that point on through the rest of the chapter, Paul shows what the elders must do in the church. Paul further instructs Titus to *“speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine”* and goes on to show how that was to be done in teaching the congregation to do their part in edifying the whole (Titus 2:1-10). He instructed the church in Ephesus in the same way (Eph. 4:11-16). When Paul sent Timothy to the church in Corinth, what was the purpose? *“For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ,* ***as I teach everywhere in every church****”* (1 Cor. 4:17). A brief survey of 1st Corinthians shows Paul’s correction, not only of several individuals, but of the congregation as a whole with regard to their improper action in the Lord’s Supper, the use of spiritual gifts in the assembly, their tolerance for false doctrine and other joint action. Again, how could they have been condemned for wrong action as a church if Christ had no pattern for congregational action?

Time fails us in considering many other passages showing the same point. The letters to the seven churches in Asia corrected and exhorted them as congregations about various failures and needs of the group jointly. The “lampstands” or “candlesticks” represented the churches (Rev. 1:20). If the rebuked church failed to correct its condemned action, Christ promised to “remove” that lampstand from its place. Why, if Christ had no pattern for what they must do? After stating that Christ is our example or pattern in 1 Peter 2, the same inspired writer commands that the oversight of elders is limited to “the flock of God which is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). Why, if there is no pattern for churches? (This one needs serious thought by one who identifies with institutional churches where the “sponsoring church” elders oversee a part of the work of other churches or assume the entire oversight of mission churches in various places across the world until those churches can have elders themselves – an action totally contrary to the commands of our Lord through this apostle.) Paul instructed, “If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows” (1 Tim. 5:16). How can anyone read this command and not understand there is a different pattern for proper action of individuals and churches acting jointly? The list could go on and on.

We are sometimes tempted to think the errors of institutionalism have passes and no further teaching is needed on them. Yet, a soul once sitting in our assembly is now self-identifying as a “liberal” in an “institutional church.” The reality of the continuing danger should be recognized. The false teaching that there is no pattern for the church, but only the individual, is plainly refuted by Christ’s word. We must teach and obey that pattern if we are to keep others from falling. Jesus said: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:29; 3:6, 13, 22). Yes, Christ has a will **for churches** as well!