

The Pattern for the Church

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This article about the sufficiency of Scripture presents Bible texts showing that the apostles established a pattern, standard or model for the church of all ages.

When we speak of the sufficiency of Scripture, we mean that the Word of God provides all that we need to know in order to be saved, to be sanctified, to worship, and to organise and operate the church of God (*2 Timothy 3.16-17*).

Historically, Baptists, Independents, and Brethren have been notably keen to take account of the last part of this definition, believing that there is a 'pattern' church in the New Testament, the apostles having consciously left an authoritative blueprint for churches to the end of the age.

It is true that the pattern church of the New Testament has never been popular with denominations that reflect the very earliest stage of the Reformation, such as Lutherans and Anglicans, who inherit their clerical and liturgical systems (cleaned up doctrinally) from the Church of Rome. They took the view that Christians may devise for themselves church organisation, methods and manner of worship, limiting the sufficiency of Scripture to salvation and sanctification. (Evangelical Anglicans still hold this limited view.)

Most evangelicals, however, until recently, believed they should seek to identify and follow the New Testament prescription for the church. But times change, and now we hear the voices of those who know better than the Lord, and who abandon the sufficiency of Scripture and its authority on church matters.

They tell us we should be 'doing church' (their term) differently, and reorganising everything to suit the culture of the world. The wheel of the church is to be re-invented. Congregations will never look the same. There is, they insist, no pattern church set out in the Bible.

The Saviour said, 'The scripture cannot be broken,' but today's 'reformers' think the traditional church found in the New Testament is out-of-date and unsuitable for the present age. They favour innovations that bring the world into the church in many ways.

Confessions Uphold the Pattern

We have heard it said that the Westminster and Baptist Confessions of Faith veer away from the concept of a pattern church, because they say (1.6) – 'there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word...'

Both Confessions, however, go on in later chapters to uphold New Testament directions about worship, the Sabbath, church structure, membership, officers, with their qualifications and appointment, the centrality of preaching, church discipline, and the ordinances.

Also, it is obvious from the known teaching and practice of the pastors and churches at the time of these Confessions that they firmly believed that the New Testament laid down the general rules for church life, and that these were crucial. The matters that were to be regulated by the accepted practice of society and common sense were practical matters such as how we are to account for money or implement voting.

A recent evangelical systematic theology defines the sufficiency of Scripture in a most inadequate and anaemic way thus, 'Scripture...contains all the words of God we need for salvation, for

trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.’ It is, of course, a non-definition, omitting any workable guidance on the scope of Scripture’s authority, and avoiding all reference to the ordering of the church. Such a definition comfortably accommodates the modern drift from practical commitment to the Bible.

1. A Representative Church Provided

Here is the first of a series of famous and pivotal commands given through the apostle Paul, saying, in effect, that his policy for church order and practice is an inspired pattern to be implemented:— ‘Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers [imitators] of me’ (*1 Corinthians 4.16*).

Just in case we should think that the apostle is only asking that we copy his godly behaviour, he proceeds to say (verse 17):

‘For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church.’

Paul’s example in Acts, and the directives in his epistles, show how we should go about things, the way we should behave, our methods, our worship, manner of government, appointment of office bearers, and every other significant matter. Writing under inspiration, the apostle sets himself forward as the one to be imitated in church matters. Our English word ‘mimic’ comes straight from the Greek translated ‘be ye followers of me’.

We should mimic the apostle. He effectively tells us that God has appointed him to lay down a pattern, so that all his recorded acts would provide the model for church life and activity throughout the ages.

We note that Paul does not say this in just one passage, but in four. There is very definitely a norm or standard for the church in the Bible, and we must humbly seek it out and apply it.

2. Practices Delivered by Paul

We look on to *1 Corinthians 11.1-2* where the same word is used:—

‘Be ye followers [mimics, imitators] of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.’

The ‘ordinances’ means (in the Greek) things handed down to us, or delivered to us – traditions. This word refers here to rather more than the two ordinances of Christ, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Once again, there is a scriptural pattern church that should direct our steps.

3. A Die or Template Provided

The third text about Paul providing a pattern is *Philippians 3.17*:—

‘Brethren, be followers [coimitators] together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample.’

The word ensample is much stronger than the word example (which some of the modern translations have). It refers to a die or stamp which embosses itself upon a mould from which an exact copy will be made. In other words, the methods of the apostle Paul and his way of doing things were so specific that they resembled a die from which tools were made.

The NASB interestingly renders the verse: ‘Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.’

Paul’s organising and operating of a church is an accurate plan to be followed by God’s people in every age.

4. An Observable Example Given

In *Philippians 4.9*, Paul speaks again of the special authority of his acts, and how they constituted

a norm. He writes:–

‘Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.’

These words follow the six ‘whatsoever things’ that should occupy the thoughts and objectives of believers in their lifestyle and service for the Lord. All that they saw Paul do was to be reproduced to secure Gospel instrumentality, the apostle referring to the ‘God of peace’, or the God who reconciles sinners to himself.

Paul, of course, was not sinless and free from mistakes. He was not divine. But clearly the Holy Spirit has preserved in the record of Scripture only the acts and prescriptions of the apostle that provide a perfect pattern for us. We are not at liberty, for example, to loftily debate whether Paul or Barnabas was right in the disagreement over John Mark. Paul is the one who is to be imitated by us, and we should learn from his judgement in the matter.

5. Instructions for the ‘Man of God’

The well-known words of *2 Timothy 3.16-17* also affirm the principle of the sufficiency of the Word for the conduct of the church.

‘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 perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.’

We should note that the ‘man of God’ is particularly mentioned. Although the words equally apply to all believers, the fact that they are applied to a pastor, and refer to all his good works, shows that the running of the church is included. Timothy is perfectly equipped from God’s Word for all his church-planting and pastoral service to God. The Word has provided an all-sufficient scheme and model for the work of the ministry, and must be honoured and implemented.

Timothy had previously been told (*1 Timothy 3.15*) how to conduct himself in the house of God. This obviously referred to the organisation of the church, because the entire passage is about the appointment of elders and deacons. Timothy must not think of redesigning the plan he has been given, and nor should we. It is divine genius, perfect, wholly efficient and most glorifying to God.

Denials of the Pattern Church Today

The so-called emerging church movement sets aside the pattern of the New Testament, and so do other groups that do not like to be called ‘emergent’, but ‘missional’. They are practically the same. They believe that churches must adapt to the needs of rebellious modern culture, going even further toward the world than the seeker-sensitive church model of recent years. But there is divine wisdom and authority in the biblical pattern, and it is all-sufficient for all times.

Direct Commands for the Church

Church instructions are presented in the Bible in several ways. There are numerous direct commands telling us how things should be done, such as the many instructions in the pastoral epistles.

1 Corinthians 16.1-2 is an example of one church practice to be followed. ‘Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week...’

This is an apostolic command that went to all the churches to be complied with. They clearly worshipped in a special way on the Lord’s Day, and gathered their offerings.

Another example of a direct command is in *Titus 1.5*. Here Paul is seen exercising his inspired authority to establish a blueprint for churches, saying to Titus:–

‘For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.’

The system of government by consent is also an example of the New Testament model being expressed by direct commands. (This is quietly avoided by Anglicans, and by many charismatics.)
Principles to be Applied

Then there are principles that we must apply, such as the Lord’s words in *John 4.23*, ‘true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth,’ meaning that in the new church age there would be no symbolism in worship (apart from the Lord’s own ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper). Accordingly, there should be no images, no physical or ceremonial actions (not even hand-raising), no flamboyant music (only simple accompaniment), but spiritual words said or sung from the heart.

Another principle from the Saviour is his washing of feet at the Lord’s Supper, not apparently literally copied by the apostles (as part of the Lord’s Supper) but followed in principle. The meaning is that elders are servants, not lords to be splendidly robed and honoured in processions, and given superior seats in the house of God. Nor should pastors be rich and covered with earthly goods like charismatic mega-church pastors. Said Christ: ‘The servant is not greater than his lord.’

Examples and Precedents to Follow

Another way the Bible conveys pattern church instruction is by example or precedent, and there are many illustrations of ongoing church life in the New Testament. These are binding or prescriptive, unless the Bible shows they were temporary, or unless it is very obvious that the act may equally well be carried out in an equivalent way, such as a warm handshake in place of a holy kiss.

This brief article is not a practical treatment of the pattern for the church, but a call for its renewed recognition and authority. The writer remembers how, as a seventeen-year-old new believer, he was taught the pattern texts in church membership class well over fifty years ago. They were standard fare in those days (and for centuries), whereas today even seminary students have often never heard of them.

Matters have become more serious with the arrival of seeker-sensitive churches, consumer churches, and now emergent churches and missional churches. None of these want the sufficiency of Scripture to get in the way of their ideas and innovations. All of them want the world and the church to become intertwined contrary to the Lord’s will.

It is immensely encouraging lately to hear questions being asked about today’s rampant fire of innovation. To give just one small example, people are asking where music ministers or directors of music are to be found in the New Testament. Christian instincts seem to be emerging again, and we must encourage and reinforce them with the abiding instructions of the all-sufficient Word of God.