

Patternism
Cecil May, Jr.

Question: For years I have been asking legalistic patternists to provide the details of the pattern they say we are required to follow. They are recalcitrant in refusing to do so. It is surely a reasonable request. If there is a pattern which we must follow to be Christ's faithful church and to be saved, what are the details of it? (A.M.)

Answer: I accept the classification "patternist" because I believe there are patterns in Scripture that the Lord wants us to follow. I am not, however, a legalistic patternist. For that matter, I am not a legalistic anything.

Legalism is the notion that we can save ourselves by our own doing, either by being correct enough (believing all the right things) or good enough (doing all the right things) to be declared righteous on that basis.

"We all have sinned. The good news of the gospel is that "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). "With his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

We are not required to be perfectly right or perfectly righteous; we are required to be faithful. We are saved by grace through faith.

Even those who eschew patterns and denounce patternism acknowledge there are patterns to be followed in scripture. It is almost universally understood that Christ is to be our pattern in conduct and attitudes.

In this response I seek to address three prevailing mistakes regarding patterns: 1) attempts to bind patterns that scripture does not really require; 2) a virtually exclusive emphasis on a pattern for congregational assemblies; and 3) denial that there is a pattern for what takes place in assembly.

Inventing Patterns

Some see patterns where, I believe, there are none.

For example, I see no binding pattern in Scripture for the use of only one container in the distribution of the fruit of the vine in the Lord's supper, or for assembly that rules out Bible classes on Sunday mornings or small group Bible studies on Sunday nights. I do not believe there are patterns that make it sinful for a congregation to give money to someone in need who is not a Christian, or to have a fellowship meal in the church building.

Recently some have maintained that biblical patterns forbid responsive reading of Scripture, or singing a hymn before or during the collection.

Many think there are such patterns and some have formed virtually separate brotherhoods because of some of them.

Space and time do not permit just now a biblical examination of those things and why I do not believe they are binding. I respect the convictions of those who hold that they are, and I appreciate those who, while holding those convictions, maintain a kindly spirit and a willingness to have friendly association with those who differ with them on such matters.

The point here is that it is not necessary to deny that there are patterns in Scripture regarding acceptable work and worship in order to recognize that some claimed patterns are not binding.

Undoubtedly some will doubt the validity of some of the patterns I think I see, just as I doubt the validity of those I just mentioned. But in the final analysis, a pattern is not

binding because I think it is, and something else in Scripture is not incidental and nonbinding because someone else thinks that way.

A well-known quote from the early days of the restoration movement reads,

Although inferences and deductions from Scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God's holy word, yet they are not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see they are so; for their faith must not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power and veracity of God (Thomas Campbell, Declaration and Address).

That is necessarily so, unless one is willing to turn authority over his or her faith to a preacher, editor or other human authority. We ought to persuade warn and admonish those we perceive to be mistaken, but we have no power to force anyone to believe or to enforce conformity to our viewpoints.

A Pattern for Life

When an appeal to biblical patterns is almost exclusively related to patterns for assemblies and to such things as congregational organization and activity, it can cause hearers to mistakenly conclude that those are the only, or at least the primary, things about which the Lord is concerned.

Jesus' judgment scenes focus on how his disciples are to minister to the needy. The Sermon on the Mount gives primary emphasis to character, motivation and recognition of our dependence on the Lord more than on ourselves. His parables remind us that we are to be a neighbor to anyone in need and to be glad and rejoice when sinners respond and repent.

When the New Testament writers come to the "How Shall We Then Live" part of their epistles (see for example, Rom. 12-14; Eph. 4-6; Col. 3-4), they do not focus primarily on assemblies and congregational programs. Their focus is on everyday life. They emphasize morality, integrity and a caring spirit.

The setting of the patterns for our lives in Christ is home (husband/wife, parents/children) and workplace (master/servant or employer/employee). The pattern includes fidelity to one's spouse and fair treatment and honesty in the work place.

In congregational life it emphasizes acceptance of the weak because Christ accepted us when we were weak.

It regulates our speech, forbidding lies, slander, obscene or corrupting talk and unsuitable jesting, calling instead for grace-filled conversation, words seasoned with salt, that encourage and edify the hearers.

It centers on attitudes, on putting away strife, bitterness and malice, and putting on kindness, tenderheartedness and a forgiving spirit.

To neglect this aspect of the biblical pattern is to give ammunition to those who think patterns are irrelevant to Christian life and ignores what the Bible primarily emphasizes. Some brethren in a tight-knit circle of fellowship including only those who agree completely with them on a particular set of issues seem to overlook continued blatant dishonesty and immorality within their number as long as the perpetrators are "sound" on the issues.

Surely no one actually teaches that it does not matter how people behave as long as their doctrine is correct, but hearers can get that idea when the lifestyle aspect of the biblical pattern is not emphasized along with other aspects deemed "doctrinal."

A Pattern for Assembly

Those who reject what they call "patternism" are usually rejecting specific aspects of a pattern for congregational assemblies that have been taught and practiced by churches of Christ through the years.

Is there a New Testament pattern for our assemblies? Is there anything in the Bible that indicates what God will be pleased with as we gather to worship him and edify one another, or is anything we choose to do that excites us and makes us feel good acceptable as an assembly activity? Is it ever important to ask concerning what we engage in as worship in our assemblies, "Is this biblical?" Should we ever wonder whether what we are about to do can be demonstrated from Scripture to be acceptable to God?

Again, a quotation from a pioneer in the early days of the attempt in America to restore apostolic practices:

Those, then, who contend that there is no divinely authorized order of Christian worship in Christian assemblies, do at the same time, and must inevitably maintain, that there is no disorder, no error, no innovation, no transgression in the worship of the Christian church — no, nor ever can be {Alexander Campbell, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things-V," Christian Baptist, Vol. 2, pp. 240-241).

Nothing can be wrong unless something right is specified against which to evaluate it. There is a New Testament doctrine of assembly. We are commanded not to neglect the assemblies because we need the stirring up and encouragement given and received in those assemblies (Heb. 10:24-25).

The fullest apostolic direction for the conduct of these assemblies is found in the first epistle to the Corinthians.

"Assembly language" begins at 1 Corinthians 11:17 where Paul begins to correct the Corinthians' behavior regarding the Lord's supper. Note how often "when you come together" is mentioned:

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat {1 Cor. 11:17-20)

This tells us the Lord's Supper belongs in the assembly.

The Corinthians had so desecrated the supper in their factionalism that they no longer could be said to come together for that purpose. The obvious implication, however, is that they were supposed to be coming together to eat the Lord's Supper. That agrees with the practice of the church at Troas who, also acting under apostolic direction, "on the first day of the week ... gathered together to break bread" (Acts 20:7).

Some, rejecting the concept of restoration, ask, "Which New Testament church should we attempt to restore? Corinth with its desecration of the Lord's supper," etc.? Obviously the restoration plea is to restore as fully as possible the church as the apostles and prophets were calling it to be. The Corinthian church, not as it was with its human frailties, but as it should be and would be when and if it fully adopted the apostle's corrections, is to be our model.

In the remainder of the eleventh chapter, Paul quotes Jesus' words in instituting the supper, just as Matthew, Mark and Luke recorded them, reminding us that the purpose of the supper was to be a memorial of the body and blood of the Lord. Meals to satisfy our hunger are to be eaten, he said, "at home" (1 Cor. 11 :24, compare v. 22).

Since they often met in their homes, the direction does not seem to be in what facility they are to eat, but rather "not in the assembly." Contrary to what some are maintaining in current popular books about the Lord's Supper, it seems to me that taking the Lord's Supper as part of a fellowship (common) meal is what Paul is here rejecting. Meals for fellowship are good, and authorized, but are not to be part of the assembly or the Lord's Supper.

The topic following the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians is the use and abuse of spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 14 returns to the topic of the assembly: when "the whole church comes together" (v. 23); "when you come together" (v. 26).

1 Corinthians 14 contains instruction dealing with miraculous spiritual gifts, especially tongues and prophecy. These are no longer part of the experience of the present day church and some have suggested that the instructions in this chapter are for a special assembly called for the exercise of those gifts and are therefore not applicable to our assemblies. However, it is more likely that those gifts would be exercised whenever and wherever those who possessed them gathered, and that 1 Corinthians 14 addresses conduct in a regular assembly of the church.

Again, it is a "come together" (assembly) chapter.

Teaching, preaching, prophesying (inspired teaching) took place in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:3, 19), as it did when Paul preached to the church in Troas when they had assembled for the breaking of bread (Acts 20:7).

Prayer also took place in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:15). Prayers are to be offered in intelligible language so all who are present can say "Amen" to what the leader says, thus making it their own prayer (1 Cor. 14:16).

They sang in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:15, 26).

Throughout the whole section a point is made that some things perfectly all right within themselves are not appropriate in the assembly.

The regular meal for the satisfaction of hunger does not belong in the assembly (1 Cor. 11:3).

Tongues, though at that time a genuine gift of the Holy Spirit, were not to be spoken in the assembly unless there was an interpreter, and then no more than two or three were to speak (1 Cor. 14:28).

Women, who are certainly permitted to speak in most places and under most circumstances, were not permitted to speak in the assemblies [during the preaching portion of the service] (1 Cor. 14:34).

The apostle is at pains to remind us that his instructions are not just the venting of his opinions. He says, "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should

acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37).

Following the discussion of the assembly in 1 Corinthians 14, the next topic in the epistle is the resurrection (ch. 15). That is immediately followed by a commandment about a collection. "Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come" (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

This was a specific collection for a particular purpose. Paul wanted the Gentile churches to help the Jewish church in Judea, to assist them in their time of want and hunger, but also to help solidify the bond between the Gentile and Jewish churches.

Some think this is telling Christians to lay up something at home, but that does not fit the context. If all laid aside their gift at home, there would still have to be a collection when Paul got to Corinth, the very thing he was saying he wanted to avoid.

The word "collection" (Greek, *logeia*) seems to refer only to public collections, not to a private activity (Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, Eerdmans, 1996, p. 240). This is strengthened by the fact that Paul urges them to "complete" the collection they had started (2 Cor. 8:6). This implies there was an already collected and known amount that fell short.

It also makes little sense to specify a particular day for adding to a fund at each home.

The likely reason (I am tempted to say the obvious reason) for specifying a day, particularly the first day of the week, the Lord's day, the day on which Christ rose from the dead, is because they were assembling on that day. That was therefore the logical occasion on which to contribute to a fund, which, in this case, would ultimately be delivered by Paul to the Jewish saints.

That indicates that the occasion when the whole Corinthian church came together to partake of the Lord's supper was on the first day of the week, just like in Troas.

This was not just a command for the Corinthian church. The churches of Galatia and Macedonia had received the same charge.

More "pattern" than the text warrants may sometimes be made out of this text. It is surely not an exclusive pattern for Sunday as the only time gifts can be given. The Bible makes it clear we are to give whenever there is a need and an opportunity. If a neighbor is in need on Monday, or if a missionary stops by for midweek Bible classes, we are to help as we have opportunity.

It is surely not a pattern saying gifts collected on Sundays can only be given to Jewish saints. Recognizing that, congregations of almost all persuasions use such collections for preacher and missionary support and for building and grounds upkeep, as well as for benevolence.

Since it was commanded, and a particular day chosen, when a congregation identifies its needs, an apostolically approved way to meet those needs is by a first day of the week contribution. At Corinth, Galatia and Macedonia the contribution was in the assembly. In the assembly, then, under apostolic direction, there was the Lord's Supper, preaching, prayer, singing and a collection to meet identified needs.

Some things, not wrong in themselves, were nevertheless not to be a part of the assembly. These included a meal for the satisfaction of hunger, tongue speakers, and women preaching.

What if a congregation should come together on Sunday morning and all dance until evening to express their joy, and when they had exhausted themselves in dance, went home? What if another group assembles to listen to a symphony orchestra? What if another burns scented candles? What if a Native American congregation smokes a peace pipe as an act of spiritual worship to the Creator? Are any or all of these acceptable activities for the assembly? Will any of these be a "fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18).

Is there any kind of direction or pattern for the assembly of which these things are not a part? May anyone, indeed, do whatever is right in his or her own eyes, and God is expected to be pleased with it, whether or not he has given even the slightest indication that he desires these things?

Does Uzziah's being struck with leprosy for offering incense which only priests were authorized to offer (2 Chron. 26:16-21) have anything at all to say about these things? Is Nadab and Abihu's destruction by fire because they "offered unauthorized fire which the Lord had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1-2) completely irrelevant to these issues, because we have heard it so many times it has become old hat?

Old Testament temple worship was sense oriented, from the burning of incense to the searing of flesh and fat and skin on the altar, to the music of orchestra and choirs. It, symbolized by circumcision, was called worship according to the flesh, while the New Testament worship is to be in spirit (Phil. 3:3). The Old Testament ordinances of worship were types and shadows; the True, the Reality, was still to come. New Testament worship is in truth.

The writer of Hebrews draws the contrast: Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Heb. 13:9-12, 15-16).

In contrast with the incense and orchestra, we offer the fruit of our lips as our sacrifice of praise. In contrast with the burnt offerings of animals, we lay our own bodies on the altar as a living sacrifice as we do good and share with others. We worship in spirit and truth and not in flesh and shadow.

The patterns identified in this column are not authoritative because I have identified and spelled them out. The New Testament is the only full statement and the only authoritative statement of our pattern.

What God has bound is bound on each of us, whether we are aware of it or not. However, I do not have the authority to bind anything on anyone. I have pointed to some of what I believe Scripture tells us is the will of God. You have to look at the evidence of scripture and decide for yourself what is true and what you will do with it.

The existence of a divinely authorized pattern for worship, or for other matters which we have not touched on, does not deny the gospel of grace.

None of us is perfect, either in our actions or in our understandings. Some are further along in the maturing process than others. Some have had more opportunities to learn than others.

We are saved by the sacrifice of Christ through our faith in him [which includes obedience to Bible commands and requirements — to save faith must live and to live faith must obey (James 2:14-26)].

However, such patterns for life and conduct, in the assembly and outside of it, tell us how our Lord would have us to live. When we recognize that he has saved us by his death, when we believe that Scripture is his own revelation of himself and his will, and when in gratitude we search the Scripture for his will for us, all because we want to please the one who died for us, that is not legalism.

It is faith working through love. (Firm Foundation, July, 2007, pp. 32-36)

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