

## PATTERN OR COMMON SENSE

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Like many preachers today, I have a few initials after my name. My favorite one is Jr. When brother Marshall Keeble was asked by an opponent in a debate, who had spouted off his many degrees, what kind of degree he had, he answered “98.6.” Brother Keeble did not have any formal earned degrees as far as I know, but he knew the word of God, and he had unparalleled wisdom and good ole common sense. Many people who go away to college to get educated leave their brains behind. We used to say, “They don’t have enough common sense to come in out of the rain.”

It is becoming more popular today to demean those of us who believe there is a pattern for what the Lord’s Church should look like in the New Testament. We are called Patternists which is one of the nicer things they call us. Their criticism relates to the Command, Example and Inference Hermeneutic used by our brethren for many years. In previous article entitled *Flawed Hermeneutic or Faulty Reasoning*, I pointed out that this approach did not begin with Restoration preachers and that it was used in both the Old and New Testaments. This article is not intended to further expound on that topic, but to simply use common sense to show there is a clear pattern for the Lord’s church in the New Testament.

When this question is discussed we are often asked, “Which church do you want to be like, Corinth, Colossae, Ephesus, etc?” We surely understand that though they may have had their own personal and cultural problems, they were the same church – each one being a church of Christ (Romans 16:16). What the critics want us to show is that each one of these churches was taught exactly the same thing. If by that, they mean to show in each of the epistles a word for word description for how to be saved, how to organize a church, how to worship, how Christians should live their lives, etc., it cannot be done. If, however, we can show that they were established in essentially in the same way, organized in the same way and provided essentially the same teaching, would not common sense tell us that in the important essential matters they were very much alike?

Dr. Dan Chambers, who preached for the Concord Road Church of Christ in Brentwood, TN wrote, “...we believe the New Testament contains a general pattern of beliefs and practices that God expects every local church to follow.” He continued, “But don’t bother looking through your New Testament for the place where all of the details of this pattern are neatly laid out. Don’t bother because it’s not neatly laid out in one particular place. Instead, it’s found in the overall teaching

of the New Testament.” (**Churches in the Shape of Scripture**, page 26)

Let’s begin at the beginning. Scripture teaches us that the Lord’s church kingdom came into the world on the Day of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2:1-4, 18-36, 47). Therefore, the first church of Christ was established in Jerusalem. I assume it is alright to use that designation for the church since Jesus did purchase it with His own blood (Acts 20:28). I do understand that other names are used to identify the church. Some are more descriptions rather than names. We do understand that in the early days the church was under the Holy Spirit inspired guidance and directions of the apostles (John 14:25-26; 16:12-15). However, we can also show that at some point that church had an organization. Men had been appointed to serve the church as elders (Acts 15:4-6, 22-23). Others were chosen to serve the Grecian Christian widows among them (Acts 6:1-6). While these men were not given the name or title of deacon, they were fulfilling the meaning of that term by serving. Does it not necessarily follow that any further churches that would be established would follow the example of the church in Jerusalem?

As the early Christians left Jerusalem, they “went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). Among those early missionaries was a man named Philip who was one of the men that had been chosen to serve the widows in Jerusalem. Can we not knowledgably conclude that a congregation of Christians was formed as a result of Philip’s preaching? Would they not have met together as the church in Jerusalem had done since its beginning (Acts 2:42, 46-47). Can we not also conclude that this church (assembly; gathering) would have had an organization similar to the Jerusalem church?

Paul was appointed by the Lord to preach to Gentiles, but when he entered a new city, he always went first to the Jews (Acts 17:2-4; Romans 11:13; 1 Timothy 2:7). As he went forth to preach, he established gatherings (churches) of people to assemble together to worship God. After his first missionary journey, along with Barnabas, on their way back to Antioch they went back to the churches they had established and “appointed elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). Although only three cities are mentioned at first in this text, can we not conclude that since Paul “appointed elders in every church” that this would be true in every church he established?

We know it was true of Ephesus (Acts 20:17-31; 1 Timothy 3:1-7). This was also true of Philippi (1:1), which also had deacons, as did Ephesus (1 Timothy 3:8-13). Titus was instructed by Paul to “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5).

Logic implies that there was more than one city on the Isle of Crete and that there was a church in each of those cities. Paul also addressed his epistle to Christians in Galatia, “To the churches of Galatia (Galatians 1:2).” Indicating, as with Crete, there was more than one congregation being addressed. Although we find the initial qualification for elders in only two places, can we rightly conclude that these qualifications were taught to these others congregations as well? (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:1-9) It seems clear then, that from Scripture the early churches followed a pattern of organization. It is right then for those of us today, seeking to be a church of Christ, to follow that pattern of organization?

We are told by Paul himself that he taught the same thing “everywhere in every church” (1 Corinthians 4:17). Even though we cannot go to every epistle, and if letters to all of the churches he established were available to us, and prove he did that. We have this inspired apostle’s word on it. He told Timothy, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (1 Timothy 2:2). Paul also wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica to, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught whether by word or our epistle” (2 Thessalonians 2:15; see also 1 Corinthians 11:2). Traditions get a lot of criticism, and we must never make human traditions law or equal to God’s word. However, as this quote from Paul indicates, some traditions are God given and must be followed. In addition to appointing elders in every church on Crete, Paul also told Titus to, “set in order the things that are lacking” (Titus 1:5). Obviously, there were other important things or traditions which were to be added to make those congregations similar to the others Paul had established. The apostle Peter wrote that by His divine power God has “given us all things that pertain to life and godliness...” (2 Peter 2:3).

Was there a common day on which early Christians met, and were there acts in which they engaged in on that day? Justin Martyr (A. D. 100-165) was an early church apologist and philosopher who was beheaded by the Roman authorities in A. D. 165. In his First Apology, he wrote concerning Christian worship, “On the first day of the week, Sunday, is the day on which we hold our common assembly,” and he went on to say it was because it was the day “Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead.” In their assemblies, he said they “listened to the writings of the apostles and prophets being read, “ and they would be “exhorted to imitate these good things... Then we all together rise and pray, the bread and the

wine and water were brought forth...prayers are offered and thanksgiving,” then a contribution was taken from those “who are willing” each “giving what he thinks is fit.” The only mention of singing was when he said after the prayers for the communion, “the people would sing out Amen.” He did write in other documents that singing without instruments was a common practice in their assemblies. He also wrote that this type of worship was following the example of the early church.

The first church in Jerusalem “continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42) The breaking of bread is generally accepted to be partaking of the Lord’s Supper, and some scholars take the word fellowship to refer to the collection and distribution of the offering. While there is no mention of singing here, or the day on which these things were observed, it is generally conceded this verse refers to their worship.

Did the early Christians assemble for worship on Sunday as Justin Martyr stated? In Acts 20:7, on his way to Jerusalem, Paul remained in Troas for seven days. “On the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread,” Paul presented a message to them. There is no mention of the other things they engaged in their assembly. but is it reasonable to assume they would have followed the example of the other churches.

Dr. G. R. Beasley-Murray, an imminent British scholar, after coming to the conclusions that observance of the Lord’s Supper on Sunday was part of worship to God, wrote, “My own views as a young pastor speedily led me to the conviction that the primitive New Testament pattern of weekly observance was there and that there was every reason to follow it.” (*A British Baptist Speaks*, from an interview with John A. Owston in the Christian Church publication, *One Body*, 1991, p. 16).

Paul praised the Corinthian brethren for remembering him and also remembering “the traditions just as I delivered them to you” (1 Corinthians 11:1). The first matters he discussed were in connection with local traditions, and this is made clear when he said, “But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God” (1 Corinthians 11:16). They obviously had been taught that partaking of the Lord’s Supper on a particular occasion was an act of worship to God honoring our Savior by remembering His sacrifice for us (Acts 11:17-33). A careful reading of this text will tell us how this memorial was to be observed, what was included in this observance, and when it was to be observed. It would appear from the text that many in this church, rather than following the example of reverence in their observance of the Lord’s Supper, had begun to

practice what was called “a love (Agape) feast” (vs 20-22, 33-34). The manner in which they were doing this resulted in the real reason for the observance of the Lord’s Supper being completely forgotten (v 20). It was to be taken by those Christian who after self-examination, would partake of it in a “worthy manner... discerning the Lord’s body” (vss. 28-29).

The text also makes it clear that a particular day of observance was set aside. What day was that? Note that Paul used the phrase “when you come together” or some form of it five times in this text (vss. 17-18, 20, 33-34 KJV), and it is also used in chapter 5:4 where the word “gathered” instead of “come” is used. Who is coming together to observe the supper is also clear, “...when you come together as a church” (v. 18; see also 1 Corinthians 14:23). The church in Corinth was coming together on a particular occasion to observe the supper. It should also be clear this was not every time they came together, but when they came together to worship. What day did they come together? We have already seen that the church in Troas came together to observe the Lord’s Supper on Sunday (Acts 20:7). Paul knew they would be meeting on Sunday to observe the supper so he remained seven days to be able to partake of it with them. Once again, if this was the practice of that church, is it not reasonable to conclude that it was the practice of the other churches Paul had established? The answer for the day they met in Corinth to worship and to observe the Lord’s Supper is found in 1 Corinthians 16:2, “On the first day of the week...,” Paul commanded these Christians to take up a collection that would be used primarily to help their brethren in Jerusalem many who were in poverty conditions. Why were they urged to do this on Sunday? It was because this was the day they came together to worship and to observe the Lord’s Supper.

Dan Chambers wrote, “What was it about the first day of every week that made it the perfect opportunity for the Corinthians to make a financial offering? The only reasonable answer is they were meeting together on that day. Sunday meetings gave them the perfect opportunity to collect their money as a congregation.” (**Churches in the Shape of Scripture**, pp. 100-101)

We can also learn other practices the church engaged in when they came together on Sunday for worship. While some question the day they came together, we can be sure of some things they did whenever they met to worship. They observed the Lord’s Supper, and they took up a collection. Some point out this was a collection for a particular purpose and not commanded as a weekly observance. That is true of course, but it gives us an example or pattern of how the early church received freewill offerings to support the work they were assigned to do. Paul’s

instruction was not only given to the church in Corinth, but it also was given “to the Churches of Galatia” (1 Corinthians 16:1). It was also the practice “throughout all the churches” (2 Corinthians 8:18-19, 23-24). Who were “all the churches?” Obviously, it was all the churches participating in this special collection. Paul also shows us that when the Corinthian Christians came together on the first day of the week in addition to the Lord’s Supper and the contribution, they would hear a message from God through a prophet or teacher, and they also sang praises to God and prayed (1 Corinthians 14:15). We have a pattern of worship from Corinth that shows when they “came together” to worship God on Sunday they engaged in five acts of worship to God each one in keeping with the inspired apostle Paul’s instructions. How do we conclude this was a practice of other churches? The answer to that question is found in this same chapter on worship: “For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (v. 33). The means of eliminating confusion in the churches was to follow the teaching of Paul in regard to the worship of God.

We could continue this study of a pattern of the early church concerning doctrine, especially the teaching about what to do to become a Christian, instruction for living the Christian life, and what the future holds for faithful children of God. The main purpose of this article to show that common sense shows a pattern for how the early church organized, and when and how it worshipped has been served. If we truly want to be a follower of Christ and His Word delivered through His apostles, it would be wise for us to follow the pattern.