

PathLights

*"Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path"
Psalm 119:104*

October 22, 2017

The Biblical Pattern for the Church

by Frank Himmel

The Jerusalem church had a number of dependent widows. Over time, some of them were being neglected in the daily serving. Acts 6 records that the church, acting on the apostles' instructions, appointed seven men to take care of that problem.

In a recent study of that passage, I read an interesting comment by Richard Longenecker in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*.

Acts 6:1-6 is particularly instructive as something of a pattern for church life today.... The early church seems to have been prepared to adjust its procedures, alter its organizational structure, and develop new posts of responsibility in response to existing needs and for the sake of the ongoing proclamation of the Word of God. Throughout

the years various so-called restorationist movements in the church have attempted to reach back and recapture the explicit forms and practices of the earliest Christians and have tried to reproduce them as far as possible in their pristine forms, believing that in doing so they are more truly biblical than other church groups. But Luke's narrative here suggests that to be fully biblical is to be constantly engaged in adapting traditional methods and structures to meet existing situations, both for the sake of the welfare of the whole church and for the outreach of the Gospel.

Is the "fully Biblical" pattern for the church to constantly engage in altering the original practices?

To begin with, this view strikes me as self-contradictory. If the pattern is to alter the pattern, how could we do that? When we make no changes, clearly we are not following the pattern. When we change things, we may seem to be following the pattern, yet by following it we have not altered it, hence we are not following it. Did you follow all that?! If not... ▶



There are simpler objections to Mr. Longenecker’s assertion.

The appointments in Acts 6 hardly constitute an ongoing pattern of alterations to organizational structure. The church was in its infancy. At this point God’s plan was still in the process of being revealed. In Ephesians 4:11, written about thirty years later, Paul identifies the same functions—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors/teachers—that we read about in the early chapters of Acts. There is no evidence of ongoing change in this or any other realm.

The appointments in Acts 6 were made at the apostles’ instruction. The apostles were divinely inspired men, directed in their preaching by the Holy Spirit (John 16:13). These appointments, therefore, were assuredly done with God’s approval. We no longer have inspired apostles living among us; how, therefore, would we know what new practices or organizational structures God would approve?



When the Corinthian church turned from “the explicit norms and practices of the earliest Christians,” Paul rebuked them for that: their women praying and prophesying uncovered (1 Corinthians 11:2-16), their

combining the Lord’s Supper with a common meal (11:17-34), their women addressing the assemblies (14:34-36), etc. In that last case Paul asked, “Was it

It is impossible to have...

Divine favor without faith (Hebrews 11:6)

Happiness without holiness (Psalm 1:1-2)

Righteousness without repentance
(Acts 3:19)

Maturity without meditation
(Hebrews 5:13-6:1)

Peace without prayer (Philippians 4:6-7)

from you that the word of the Lord first went forth? Or has it come to you only?” (v. 36). The only basis on which these different practices could have been acceptable was a revelation from God that ordered them. Of course, the Corinthians had no such new revelation—and neither do we!

How far may a church go in constantly adapting traditional provisions to meet existing situations? May we also change the worship, the work, and the word (the message)? Evidently most think we may, judging from popular practice. Yet Jesus insisted that acceptable worship must be in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24); and our preaching must always be “the word,” “sound doctrine,” “the truth” (2 Timothy 4:1-4).

The Biblical pattern is to “hold fast the pattern of sound words” we have from the apostles (2 Timothy 1:13, NKJV), not to constantly change it. ■

Service Leaders for the Week

	Sunday Morning	Sunday Evening	Wednesday Evening
GREETER	Greg Winget	Chris Brooks	John Baucom
SONG LEADER	Carlos Garcia	J B Williams	Daven Daniel
OPENING PRAYER	Brian Wilson	TBD	
LORD’S SUPPER			
BREAD	Bruce Hollander	Bruce Hollander	
CUP	Mark Clifton	Mark Clifton	
CONTRIBUTION PRAYER	Jason Chandler		
SERMON/INVITATION	Frank Himmel	Singing	Bruce Williams
CLOSING PRAYER	David Gray	TBD	Josh Baucom