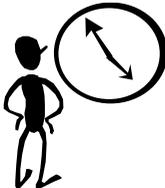


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### Time of Assembly



|                       |            |
|-----------------------|------------|
| <b>Sunday:</b>        |            |
| Bible Study           | 9:00 a.m.  |
| Worship               | 10:00 a.m. |
| (Or every other week) |            |
| Bible Study           | 4:00 p.m.  |
| Worship               | 5:00 p.m.  |
| <b>Wednesday:</b>     |            |
| Bible Study           | 7:00 p. m. |

## Departing From the Pattern

By Matthew W. Bassford

The biblical plan for the New Testament church is simple. There are a few things we are supposed to do in our assemblies, a few more that we are supposed to do with our money, and that's it. The scope of the Biblical pattern is extremely narrow.

It is unsurprising, then, that since the beginning, God's people have been unsatisfied with that pattern and have wanted to depart from it. The church of the first century became the Catholic Church of later centuries, which bears little resemblance to anything in Scripture. In our own time, whenever churches have gotten wealthy and powerful, they've started coming up with all these other ideas for other things that the church might do, especially with money. However, there is no biblical precedent for these new works.

What do we do with that? Is it OK, for instance, for us to alter our singing by bringing in a band to help us worship? Is God pleased when churches start spending money on whatever they think is right? Or is there another way that we should be looking at things? Today, let's use a story from 1 Samuel 8 to guide us as we consider the subject of departing from the pattern.

### *Demand for a King*

The first part of the story concerns a demand for a king. Let's read from I Samuel 8:1-5. The fact pattern here is straightforward. Samuel's sons are corrupt judges, so the people come to him and ask him to appoint a king instead.

This process reveals several important truths to us. First, people want to abandon the pattern when they think it's failing. The Israelites didn't want a king when Samuel was in his prime. They only sought change when Joel and Abijah started messing up.

So too today, people want to change the worship and

work of the church when they perceive that the church is failing. The singing is rotten, so bring in the band. The poor are hungry, so start up a food pantry, and so on. We abandon the pattern when we think the pattern isn't working.

However, both the Israelites and people today make the same mistake. We like to blame the pattern when people are at fault. In the Israelites' time, the problem wasn't with the judgeship. It was with the judges. Sadly, rather than removing the judges, their solution was to abandon the judgeship.

We too, when God's work isn't getting done, prefer to blame the pattern instead of ourselves. We don't fix the rotten singing by singing more enthusiastically. We don't care for the poor by using our own money. Instead, we want the church to change because that's a quick fix that doesn't require us to grow in Christ.

Finally, departures from the pattern generally are influenced by the world. The Israelites didn't only want a king; they wanted a king like the nations around them. When the Lord's people abandon the pattern, they also are not very original. Our progressive brethren think they're breaking new ground, but really, they're becoming exactly like the denominational churches around them. 3000 years later, things still play out the same.

## *God's Reply*

Next, we see God's reply to the Israelites. Consider I Samuel 8:6-18. In this section, He identifies three problems with their demand.

The first is that departing from the pattern rejects Him as king. They didn't want to be ruled by God anymore. They wanted to be ruled by one from among themselves.

The same holds true for us. When we reject God's pattern, we reject God's kingship. If we truly want His will to be done in all that we do, we will confine ourselves only to what we read in the Scriptures.

On the other hand, when we start doing things that aren't in the Bible, that's no longer God's will. It's our will. We only go along with God when He tells us to do what we want to already. That's not obedience. It's a coincidence.

Second, God says that abandoning the pattern is the same thing as idolatry. This seems like a strange claim for Him to make, given that the story contains no graven images. However, the idol to which He is referring is the most dangerous idol of all: the Israelites themselves.

For us too, self-idolatry is a deadly spiritual danger. Let's be honest for a moment. When we abandon the old path of the New Testament for a new path of our own invention, who are we exalting? Whom are we lifting up?

Is it God and His wisdom and authority? Or is it we ourselves, with our human ingenuity and cleverness? How wonderful it is, that in our wisdom we have come up with this great new work for God's church that surely He would have included ... if only

He'd been a little smarter!

The idolatry's not hard to see, is it?

Finally, God points out that the Israelites haven't thought through the consequences. Once they get a king, he is going to take their children, their property, and their own selves. Even though God doesn't mention it here, there are going to be severe spiritual consequences too. Ultimately, the kings will lead Israel into apostasy and captivity.

Historically, leaders in the Lord's church haven't been great at anticipating consequences either. When the second-century church started appointing single bishops over cities, I'm sure that no one foresaw it eventually would lead to the appointment of a pope, but it did. In our own time, I doubt that the leaders of the institutional split thought their teaching would lead to female preachers, adoption of the instrument, and downplaying the necessity of baptism, but it has.

Brethren, none of us are God. We're rotten at seeing the end from the beginning. Rather than striking out on our own, we're much better off confining ourselves to His revealed will. He's thought His ideas through, and we haven't.

## *The People's Decision*

Last, in this story, we see the people's decision. It appears in I Samuel 8:19-21. Despite God's warnings, they persist in their demand for a king.

Notice, though, that a new motivation has appeared. The people don't just want a king to judge them. They want a king to go out before them and fight their battles for them. That way, they don't have to do anything.

In the same way, I fear that a lot of Christians want the church to fight their battles for them. They don't want to embarrass themselves with heartfelt singing, so the church needs to bring in the instrument. They don't want to be hospitable, so the church needs to build a fellowship hall. They don't want to interact with the poor, so the church needs to do that for them. By the end of this process, the church does everything, and the disciples do nothing. It's perfect for people who want to be do-nothing disciples.

Finally, though, notice what God tells Samuel to do with the people who want to depart from His will. He tells him to give them the king they have asked for. They don't want to do right, so He will allow them to do wrong.

So too today. God doesn't force any of us to do right, and we don't force anybody to do right either. We can warn others, we can point them to the word, but we can't control them without abandoning the pattern ourselves. All we can do is make sure that in our lives and in our congregation, we remain faithful.



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# You Wouldn't Believe It

By Doy Moyer

*"Look, you scoffers, marvel and vanish away, because I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will never believe, even if someone were to explain it to you"*  
(Acts 13:41).

Paul quoted this from Habakkuk 1:5. In Habakkuk's context, the sins of the people had reached a point where God would bring judgment upon them. Habakkuk asked about it, and God told him that what was about to happen (using the Chaldeans to judge) would be something he wouldn't believe. How could God use a wicked nation like Babylon to judge his own people? Unbelievable. But that's exactly what he did.

God does not conform to our expectations. If we cannot live with that, then we can never accept what comes next.

Fast forward to the time of the preaching of the gospel. Paul preaches the death, resurrection, and kingship of Christ. The manner in which God accomplished salvation through Christ was, as in Habakkuk's day, unbelievable. And it served as a warning to those who rejected the message. If we expect God to act according to the way we think he ought, and then we reject him when he doesn't conform to our thoughts, then we can only expect that "what is said in the prophets" would happen to us.

God's ways and thoughts are not ours. If we are not humble enough to accept that, then our own arrogance will get in the way of what comes next.

Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 1-2 falls right in line here. The cross was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. God has accomplished something through Christ that is unbelievable to mere human rationale. We wouldn't do it this way.

Yet that is part of what makes the gospel message so amazing. It's not a story concocted in the minds of Jews or Gentiles. I could not have dreamed this up and neither could you. It's a story they wouldn't believe. A Jewish peasant from an obscure place in Galilee is crucified as a criminal (the most shameful, humiliating death imaginable), then raised from the dead and proclaimed Savior of the world? For so many, this is "a work that you will never believe, even if someone were to explain it to you."

It's only from the mind of God that salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus could be accomplished. Tell the story. Many won't believe it because it doesn't fit their rational categories. But when all the dust settles, all the options considered, there is really only one place to land.

God did a work that may be unbelievable on the surface, but it is in demonstration of his love and power. It will have its scoffers as it always has, but scoffers pass on and vanish. The Gospel remains. Who and what will you trust?

