

# church of Christ at Greenwood

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## Pattern or Chaos?

*“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was **formless for and void**, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. **Then God said...**” (Genesis 1.1-3ff)*

By His spoken word, God created order from chaos — separating light from darkness (Genesis 1.3-4), day from night (verse 5), atmospheric waters from terrestrial (verses 6-8), and seas from land (verses 9-10). He established the systems by which plants (verse 11-13), animals (verses 20-25), and humans (verses 26-28a) reproduce “after their kind;” and He established the hierarchy by which all of His creation co-exists and mutually benefits (verses 28b-30). He set “lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and...for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (verses 14-19). And “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (verse 31), an inviolable design for the ages. Indeed, “While the earth remains, Seedtime and harvest, And cold and heat, And summer and winter, And day and night Shall not cease” (8.22).

**From the beginning, “God is not a God of confusion”** (1 Corinthians 14.33), and the patterns established at creation are reflected in subsequent divine revelation. For example, by God’s design, “The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed after their kind, and trees bearing fruit with seed in them, after their kind; and God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1.12). This system replanted the earth after the flood, confirmed to Noah the receding of flood waters (Genesis 8.11-14), and ordered the Jewish feast calendar (Exodus 23.14-19; 34.22-23; Deuteronomy 16.1-17). Furthermore, the seed’s two essential functions established at creation — giving life, and transmitting qualities to offspring — are the foundation of Jesus’ parable of the sower (esp. Luke 8.11) and Peter’s inspired words, “for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1.23).

Further, consider the seventh-day sabbath rest, previewed in Exodus 16 and codified in 20.8-10 — “For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy” (verse 11; cf. Genesis 2.1-3). The creation week itself formed the pattern for Israel’s calendar week, which subsequently prefigures the Sabbath rest which remains for the people of God (Hebrews 4.1-11).

Likewise, when the LORD spoke to Moses at Mt. Sinai concerning His earthly dwelling place and its furnishings, He explicitly warned, “According to all that I am going to show you, as *the pattern* of the tabernacle and *the pattern* of all its furniture, just so you shall construct it” (Exodus 25.9); “See

that you make them after *the pattern* for them, which was shown to you on the mountain” (verse 40); “Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to *its plan* which you have been shown in the mountain” (26.30; cf. Numbers 8.4). Twice in the New Testament (Acts 7.44; Hebrews 8.5), when recounting God’s nature and expectations, this divine *pattern* mandate is recalled.

**Pattern language also fills the New Testament**, and this should not surprise, since Jesus did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5.17). In fact, “whatever was written in earlier times,” including that Law and those Prophets, “was written for our instruction” (Romans 15.4); and Old Testament narratives are preserved “as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Corinthians 10.11). Rather than explicitly or implicitly eschewing the “patternism” of the Old Testament in favor of some looser hermeneutic, the New Testament points us back to those patterns to learn the nature and character of God.

Further, the New Testament explicitly *upholds patternism*. The apostle Paul commended Christians in Rome, who “became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed” (Romans 6.17). Knowing well “that form of teaching,” they were urged, “keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them” (16.17). The Corinthians were repeatedly admonished to remember and follow Paul’s “ways which are in Christ” (1 Corinthians 4.17; i.e. his personal example, cf. 11.1) and his consistent doctrine among various local churches, “just as I teach everywhere in every church” (1 Corinthians 4.17; cf. 7.17; 16.1-2). Similar words were addressed to the Philippians: “Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us” (3.17); and “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (4.9). The Thessalonians were commanded to “keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us” (2 Thessalonians 3.6). Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus frequently enjoined “soundness” (1 Timothy 1.10; 4.6; 6.3-4; 2 Timothy 4.3; Titus 1.9, 13; 2.1, 2, 8), including the exhortation, “Retain *the standard [pattern, form] of sound words* which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1.13).

**An “anti-pattern” spirit** is certainly nothing new. In 1957 David Lipscomb College lectureship, school president Athens Clay Pullias first presented his lecture entitled “Where There Is No Pattern,” which later received wider distribution as a tract by the same name. “In the 1960s and 1970s, a group of brethren advocated fellowship with those of differing doctrines and practices, even with those in denominations, claiming there is no diagram or blueprint of what the church should be” (John Isaac Edwards, “Hold Fast the Pattern,” *Truth Magazine*, June 2011, 4) — sometimes called the grace-unity movement, associated with the names Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett. Those same notions were re-packaged and re-popularized by F. LaGard Smith’s 2003 book, *Who Is My Brother? Facing a Crisis of Identity and Fellowship*. In 2009, Edward Fudge published five installments under the title “The Plague of Patternism,” in which he assailed “this doctrinal system [known] as ‘CENI-S,’ an abbreviation for ‘command, example, necessary inference’ and ‘silence,’” and declared that “patternism itself had been wrong from the beginning.”

Sadly, that spirit is alive and well today, advocated by new voices, and its doctrine-dismissive sentiment is finding its way into some pulpits — for example, “My security is not in what I believe but in Who I believe in,” as if to separate Christ from His teaching and that of His inspired messengers. The New Testament is increasingly being described as a “love letter” and “narrative,” and those who uphold so-called *blueprint theology* are decried as “legalistic patternists,” “Pharisees,” and preachers of “merit-based righteousness.”

**Biblical patternism** is *not* the worship of patterns, as some slanderously charge, rather it is reverence for the Divine Architect who drew those patterns (Hebrews 12.2). It is adherence to Biblical standards in due respect for the Lord’s authority (Matthew 17.5; 28.18; Ephesians 1.22-23; Colossians 1.18), serving Him under law to Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 9.21; Galatians 6.2); never daring to call Him “Lord,” or espouse Him as our pattern, apart from His teachings (Matthew 7.21-27; Luke 6.46-49).

*“If Scriptures set no norm, there is no norm; thus, nothing abnormal. If there is no pattern, then there is no wrong/sin. If there is no sin, every person can be a law to himself. If each is his own law, what place does God occupy? Why is He even needed?”* (Bobby Graham). But Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14.15), “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him” (verse 21), and “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (15.10). The apostle John added, “And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments” (2 John 6).

**“Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.”** (2 John 8-11)

*~jeremy paschall*