**IMITATING AN IMITATION?**

Often, we hear NT Christians speak of “restoring the church” and “following the pattern.” Such words are sweet music to my ears, because I believe in those concepts, too! All who profess faith in Christ need to be reacquainted with the notion of following the Bible *alone* – hence the concept of **restoring** (bringing back) **the church** (people of God) **to the pattern** (of Scripture, cf. 2Tm.1:13). However, I sometimes worry that some of my brethren have a flawed concept of “restoration.” Those of whom I speak do not seek torestore the original, *but a cheap imitation of the original* – a serious mistake, indeed! Please think with me for a while about this matter.

By way of illustration, people who use copy machines understand that in the copy, there is a certain amount of degradation from the original. Further, when you make “a copy of a copy,” there is even further degradation. Hence, theoretically, one could make so many copies from copies that (eventually) it would not resemble the original at all.

Several years ago, I watched with interest some construction workers who were adding a porch onto my house. As they cut the rafters, I noticed that they had one marked “PAT” (short for “pattern”). This was a smart move! You see if they had cut each rafter from the previous one (rather than the pattern), then each rafter would have gotten just a little longer each time. That would have yielded a grotesque and dysfunctional result for my new porch; so I am glad that those men followed the pattern!

Now, let’s apply what we have learned. I fear that some have a concept of “restoration” which amounts to imitating a particular local church (or churches) of Christ in the United States. If a majority of brethren practice something, it must be right! If my favorite church (or preacher) does something, then it must be right. With all due respect to all of my brethren who strive to do right, *no church or preacher is the standard for us to follow* (2Cor.10:12-13)! I should not have to state the obvious, but I will: ANY Christian can err from the truth (1Cor.10:12); and ANY church can err from the truth (Ac.20:29-31). Therefore, it is unwise to become followers of men. This is why, when Paul said, “Imitate me,” he quickly added, “just as I also imitate Christ”(1Cor.11:1). You see, ultimately*, Christ is the standard by which faithfulness is measured.* Hence, when Paul had to “restore” the church at Corinth, his appeal was to **the original** – that which he had “received from the Lord” (cf. 1Cor.11:17-26). The failure to restore the original ultimately leads to denominationalism!

“That doesn’t affect us,” you say? How many churches of Christ meet every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night *– simply because everyone else does?* I know of some Christians who feel they “must” seek out a church on Wednesday night, *even though they are away from home,* because that has become “the pattern” for them. Do not misunderstand: there is nothing wrong with meeting with saints on Wednesday night when you’re travelling; I do so myself! *But it is NOT required by “the pattern!”* And yet, many do it for that very reason, i.e., they think it’s required! In their minds, it is “heresy” to suggest otherwise.

Now, consider the “flip side” of the same problem: Some new method or manner of doing the Lord’s work has great appeal with certain people in a certain place. Admittedly, it is NOT wrong; but new, fresh *– AND disturbing!* Sadly, some will make it their mission to imitate the new, *just because it IS new!* With good intentions, they seek to “force” change, whether people like it or not. This can often result in heartbreaking division; not because it is sinful, but because someone is **determined** to “imitate an imitation” *– no matter what the consequences!* This approach is just as flawed as the approach of those who are “bound” by tradition (carefully consider Rm.14:19).

When I was a teenager, I had a 1963 Ford Fairlane 500. It was in pretty good shape; but I wanted to “fix it up,” as we used to say. I wanted to paint it candy-apple red, and put on wide tires with “mag” wheels. I wanted to do a few things to the interior as well. I had two hindrances: cash – and DAD! Now, had I been allowed to do what I wanted, the result might have been “very cool” *– but it would not have been a “restoration.”* To truly restore an automobile, one must go back to the **original** form. Spiritually, when we imitate something other than the original, we might end up with something WE like very much *– yet fail to “restore” Christ’s church!* Brethren, let us be careful that we are imitating the right **thing** for the right **reason.** Our mission is NOT to be like other churches of Christ!

--Lanny Smith