



“Innovations and the Divine Pattern”

Part I: A History of Innovation

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It is a great pleasure for me to have this time with you to talk about the word of God. There are many religious broadcasts you could choose to watch or listen to today that represent a wide array of philosophies or religious teachings. But in this half hour together, we simply appeal to the New Testament scriptures as our guide in all matters of faith and practice. We’re not interested in being popular or in keeping up with the latest trends in religion; rather, in simply advocating for the practice of the Christian faith as it was originally authored by Christ and His apostles. It seems that those who do so today are a voice crying out in the wilderness. But God’s word says, **“If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11)**. That is, *only as God Himself has spoken*. The weeping prophet of old, Jeremiah, pleaded with the people who seemed to have little interest in that which was ancient, tried, and true.

Jeremiah 6:16 “Jer 6:16 Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls...”

The prophet made such a plea to the old Israel because of the tendency of God’s people to drift away from the truth. It is no different with the new Israel, the church. Since its beginning in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, change and innovation in the church of Christ has been a constant force that has led to what we have now: error, division, and an overall departure from the model church revealed in the New Testament.

Well, today we begin a series of lessons on *Innovations and the Divine Pattern*. We’ll start with an overview of the history of the church and the long line of changes that it has experienced throughout the centuries, almost since its birth on the Day of Pentecost.

When Jesus began building His church and when the revelation of His will through the apostles was finished, the church was complete and perfect in the eyes of God. All the truth it would ever need to continue and unite it throughout her history was given in the New Testament scriptures. The church as we read about it in the pages of the New Testament was structured and designed just as God had eternally planned. Jesus, its builder, by His divine authority, placed within it everything that He desired for it to have to complete its mission and purpose in the world. Jesus was given all authority by God the Father (**Matthew 28:18**), and Christ in turn delegated His authority to His apostles, who were His ambassadors left in the world (**II Corinthians 5:20**). Therefore, the church of Christ submits to Christ's authority and His authority alone, which was expressed through the teachings of His apostles. The church as it existed under the guidance and approval of the first-century apostles, was exactly what God desired for it to be throughout the ages to come.

But in every dispensation of God's dealings with mankind, it hasn't taken long for God's people to digress from God's way. It is a pattern that repeats itself again and again: in a relatively short time, people find ways to make changes to the pattern that God originally sets forth. And the scriptures show us that God was NOT pleased when people in the past set aside what He had set in place in deference to their own will and their own ways and their own desires. The New Testament age is no different. The church had hardly been in existence any time before trouble arose and men began to drift from and to outright oppose the apostles' inspired teachings.

For example, the apostles fought the resurgence of Judaism and the effort to take Christians back to the law of Moses. They had to oppose the Gnostics and their supposed knowledge and enlightenment that led people away from the truth of Jesus. As the gospel spread to the Gentiles and throughout the Roman Empire, there was the constant pull and tug of pagan influences, pagan ideas, and pagan practices that threatened to corrupt the church. Peter warned the church:

II Peter 2:1 "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily (*secretly or craftily*) shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction."

He pictures an ultimate apostasy away from Christ and away from the truth. You know, that is a gradual process. In the year 58 AD—just twenty-five years after the establishment of the Lord's church on Pentecost—Paul finds himself in Ephesus tearfully warning the elders of that congregation of coming corruption.

Acts 20:29-30 "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

The word *perverse* means that they would speak things that would pervert—*add, take away from or change*—the gospel and they would lead people away from the truth. Paul's prediction came to pass. Four years later from Rome, he wrote his letter to the Ephesian church still calling them saints and faithful in Christ Jesus. But just five years from that point in the year 67 AD—only nine years after Paul had that final meeting with those elders and warned them of what was to come—he wrote to Timothy, who he had left in Ephesus as a safeguard and instructed him concerning the false teachers who were already at work among them. Paul's prediction was coming to pass. Within a generation, we see this depiction of the church at Ephesus:

Revelation 2:1-5 “Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”

They are described as a church whose love had grown cold and that was now in danger of falling away and of having their candlestick removed by Christ altogether. That is the nature of change and apostasy.

II Thessalonians 2:7 “For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way.”

Even in Paul’s lifetime, in the first century—67-68 AD—Paul said the *mystery of iniquity* was already working among the church. Little by little, false doctrine, change, and innovation led those in the early church to depart from the truth in one respect or another and from the original pattern and practice of Christianity. When you look at the succeeding centuries, you simply see a mass departure from nearly any semblance of the original design for Christianity. The passing of the centuries has only led men and women further and further from the truth.

Not only was there a departure in teaching, but in the organization and practice of the early church. One of the first corruptions of the design of the church was in regard to its organization and its government. The Bible teaches that the only rightful head of the church is Jesus Christ (**Ephesians 1:22**). He is the head of the church. The church was built by Christ on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (**Ephesians 2:20**). That is, upon the authority of apostolic teaching, which we now have in the New Testament scriptures. That describes the universal body of believers: all of those who are called out of sin and saved by the gospel are added to the church (**Acts 2:41,47**).

But that merely describes a relationship of believers to Christ, of people called out of the world and placed into Christ. The only organized, visible church or entity that we read about in the New Testament scriptures are local churches that were made up of believers who banded together in local communities. That is, those of like precious faith from city to city came together into local congregations of the church of Christ. Each congregation was to be autonomously overseen by scripturally qualified elders and deacons. They appointed elders in every city (**Acts 14:23**). They went from church to church appointing elders to oversee the affairs of each particular congregation. That is the only visible organization that you read anything about in the early church: a local church that follows the teachings of the apostles under the oversight of its own elders and deacons. You don’t read of any organization larger than any one local church. You read of no hierarchy of power or authority outside of the eldership of each local church. Today when you see religious organizations, for example, that have conventions, councils, superintendents, presidents, and so on, you are seeing something that is foreign to the model of the first-century church.

Paul told the elders in the church at Ephesus:

Acts 20:28 “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

Elders are appointed in each church and are charged with overseeing only the church that they are among. But this quickly changed after the apostles died. By the second century, church leaders began appointing bishops to rule over local elders. According to scripture, an *elder* and a *bishop* refer to the same office. An elder is a bishop, and a bishop is an elder. Again, according to the Bible. But men changed that divine order. That began in what may have seemed to many to be a very innocent way. Elders in older churches began going over to smaller, newer churches to help settle their problems and solve their difficulties and differences. That within itself was a departure from the divine plan, as subtle and insignificant as it may seem to many people. But within a short amount of time, this led to something even much more serious. Very soon, men began to take it upon themselves to appoint bishops to oversee the work of these elders in a given city or area of the country. These bishops who had been appointed distinguished themselves from the elders, began to take on more and more power, and then began seeking this position of authority, assuming powers which the scriptures never gave them.

It didn't stop there. This arrangement spread until churches were grouped together into what was called a *diocese* and bishops were then selected to be *archbishops* to oversee an entire diocese of churches. This unbiblical hierarchy continued to evolve until finally, one universal bishop was appointed to rule over all the churches and by the 6th century, this man came to be known as the *pope*. Now, that is not a New Testament arrangement. But once the door was opened, once God's arrangement for church government of elders governing their own congregations was infringed upon and once men began to innovate upon that divine order, there was no stopping until it reached its logical end, with one man overseeing all the congregations of the church on earth. Folks, that is an innovation of men that began very soon after the apostles died, but it did not take place under their oversight. It didn't take all that long for small churches to lead to an entire rearrangement and corruption of God's plan for church organization and government. Consequently, that paved the way for all kinds of change and digression. The simplicity of the gospel, the purity of the church's worship, its organization and government were all soon corrupted until it eventually became nearly unrecognizable to the church that Jesus Christ established. With this growing pyramid of human power, the church was very easily led into all kinds of error, including the merging of Christianity and paganism that was rife in Rome and throughout the Roman Empire.

Let me give you some examples. One such example came just about ninety years after the establishment of the church when in 120 AD, “holy water” was first introduced into the church. It was customary in pagan worship for the worshippers to wash their hands and sprinkle water on themselves before entering into a pagan temple. Well, church leaders began imitating this practice in Christian worship. The spirit of innovation was already afoot. Eventually, it was superstitiously used as a way to sanctify the worshippers and drive away worldly thoughts and evil spirits from them. The Bible never speaks of such a thing. The only water connected with the New Testament is that involved in the washing of baptism, which is simply an act of obedient faith and a likeness of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. It's merely a step of obedience where the penitent sinner enters into a new relationship with Christ. There is nothing mystical or magical about it. There is nothing “holy” about the water itself; it is merely a step of faith in which the believer has his sins washed away and enters into Christ spiritually speaking. “Holy water” was invented by leaders of the now apostatizing church and it is something that the Bible never says anything about.

Well, it wasn't very long until the church began to observe "holy days." By the middle of the 2nd century, the bishop of Rome had set aside forty days before the anniversary of Christ's death and resurrection to fast and observe what was known as *lent*. No such observance was ever mentioned in the New Testament, but this innovation and doctrine entered in about one hundred years after the establishment of the church. That may be a long, long time ago, but it's hundred years too late. During this observance of *lent*, Christians were told to give up meat, any strong drink, and to abstain from any worldly pleasure for this brief period of time. You see, Rome permitted members to live one way 325 days of the year, but to live another way for 40 days. The Bible never teaches any such thing. What's wrong on one day is just as wrong on any other day, and what's right on one day is just as right on any other day.

By 325 AD, it was decreed that on the Sunday following the first full moon of Spring that the church was to observe Easter. The word *Easter* appears in the New King James version in **Acts 12** and is how the King James translators translated the word *pascha*, which refers to the *paschal* or *Passover* lamb. So, that word is more accurately translated *Passover* instead of *Easter*. The fact is that Christians are to celebrate the resurrection of Christ every Sunday, the Lord's Day, in the observance of the Lord's Supper.

I Corinthians 11:26 "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come."

Paul taught that not only do we look back upon Christ's death, but we also anticipate His coming since He rose again. But now since three hundred years after the establishment of the church, religious people have adopted this innovation in doctrine and in practice and continue to celebrate *Easter* as a yearly religious observance of the resurrection of Christ on the Sunday following Passover, which again the Bible simply does not teach. It is an addition, an innovation. Along with this celebration come the images of rabbits, baby chickens, and eggs. Have you ever wondered why that is? Well, they are symbols of fertility and the springtime is the time of year when the dormant earth awakens with new life and so forth. So, every spring, the ancient pagans of that day worshipped their goddess of spring, names Eostre. (Now you see where the word *Easter* comes from.) They worshipped her for bringing life and fruitfulness back after a long winter. The Roman church adapted this celebration to its celebration of the resurrection of Christ. You'll find that many if not most innovations are just like that: they have been motivated by the desire to compromise *with* or make Christianity more appealing *to* the world or the culture. But in so doing, you see, there are departures from the scriptures and from the purity of the original church.

By 200 AD another change took place as the elders over local churches assumed the title of priests. In the New Testament, every Christian is considered a priest before God, but again, men changed this biblical office into something the Bible neither teaches nor authorizes. We'll get into that more in a future study.

A little later, in the third century, the doctrine of *purgatory* arose, teaching that the dead who are not guilty of mortal sins could go to this supposed place of temporary punishment and have their impurities and imperfections removed, then go to heaven. This teaching emerged and developed through the centuries, finally becoming an official doctrine of the apostate church by late in the 11th century. But it was never taught by Christ or His apostles, nor was anything like it.

In 250 AD the mode of baptism was changed. Baptism was always by immersion in the 1st century church. But in 250 AD, first as a way to baptize the sick or those unable to be immersed, people began substituting sprinkling in place of immersion in cases of so-called necessity. By the year 1311, it was declared merely a matter of total indifference and consequently, there are many churches today—not just the Roman church—that practice sprinkling and call it baptism. The Bible, however, always describes baptism as a burial (**Colossians 2:12, Romans 6:4**). The word *baptize* itself means *to immerse, to plunge, to submerge*. So, if you were sprinkled as a form of baptism, you need to know that such is foreign to the scriptures and it is an unscriptural innovation that came long after Jesus and His apostles commanded people to be baptized for the remission of their sins (**Acts 2:38**).

By 370 AD, you have the first case of infant baptism. Whereas in the New Testament, baptism was always the immersion of one who could confess belief in Jesus and repented of sin. This too was an innovation upon the divine design for baptism.

In the 4th century, they began calling the Lord's Supper a *mass*. The New Testament doesn't refer to it like that. That originated over three hundred years after Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper.

Then, in 666 AD, another significant change took place in the worship of the church, as Pope Vitalian authorized the use of instrumental music in the church's worship. For six hundred years, the church came together and sang without the use of a mechanical instrument. That is simply history. But this changed some six hundred and thirty years after Christ established His church. Today, most religious organizations use instrumental music in their worship, thinking nothing of it. They take it for granted. But this relic of Old Testament worship was NOT the practice of the original church. Rather, Christians are simply told to sing and make melody in our hearts to the Lord (**Ephesians 5:19**). For six hundred years, the church sang *a cappella*.

But, friend, the drumbeat of change and innovation in no way stopped in 666 AD. There is much more than time will permit me to mention here in today's study. After the Protestant Reformation was ignited by Martin Luther in 1517, protestant denominations began to emerge. But while they protested the corruption and abuses of the Roman church, they retained many practices of Romanism in one form or another. Many things such as the separation of clergy and laity, sprinkling for baptism, infant baptism, instrumental music, and other things continued to be very widespread in religion today. And they are all the result of innovations upon the divine pattern. Those changes have only continued with the rise of sectarian denominationalism and its own forms of church organization and forms government that are foreign to the New Testament. I might quickly mention that in the 18th century, an educator named Robert Raikes in England originated a school on Sunday to educate children who were made to work throughout the week. This was quickly introduced into the church as a way of teaching the Bible. Individual cups originated in the 19th century. And on and on we could go with the history of innovation. In our studies to come, we'll talk about these innovations on an individual basis and how they are a corruption of the divine pattern.

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