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The Problem with Patternism

By Barry Sanford

“Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.” (John 5:39, KJV)

“You diligently search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. Yet these are what bear witness about me. And you refuse to come to me that you might have life.” (John 5:39, NIV)

Within our tradition the King James Version of John 5:39 has been possibly one of the most misappropriated of all scriptures. Because the Oxford committee opted to render *ereunate* as an imperative rather than an indicative (“Search!” rather than “You search”),¹ the text has been cited as an authoritative command to study scripture, applicable to all people of all time. Additionally, through a curious disregard of the verb *dokeite* (“you think”) in the dependent clause, the text has been made out to say, “Search the scriptures, for in them you have eternal life.” This sounds like a positive exhortation to study scripture, with eternal life promised as the reward for due diligence. Handled this way, John 5:39 has been the perfect proof-text in support of obligatory Bible school attendance.² While I fully endorse Bible classes, the truth is that even if Jesus spoke in the imperative mood to those persons at that time, that would still not warrant the extrapolation of his words to the status of a universal command. In

any case, *dokeite* cannot be ignored. When taken into account *dokeite* creates reversal. The nuance of *dokeite* is, “You may *think* such and such is true, but just the opposite is true.” Thus the King James translation tends to obscure the timbre of the situation. It is clear from verse 18 that Jesus was speaking to mortal adversaries. These words were much more likely a stinging rebuke than a friendly admonition. Apparently in consideration of this most if not all of the twentieth century English versions have rendered *ereunate* in the indicative. Liberally amplified, the gist of the passage is,

You have your noses buried in the scrolls because that’s where you think you’ll find eternal life, but you are wrong; eternal life is to be found in me. You are missing the very point those scriptures are trying to make to you, which is I, the Messiah. You are desperately seeking eternal life – but you are looking in precisely the wrong place. You are scrutinizing the scriptures when you need to be scrutinizing me.

I have belabored John 5:39 because I fear the passage too painfully describes our condition, myself included. I too have been one buried in the texts, fixated on the first century, and seeking a pattern in the replication of which I had hoped to win my salvation. I think I too had missed the central point of the texts: Jesus Christ. In fact, what had reinforced my patternism was a flawed theology: man will save his soul by the application of his wits to the text. By

patternism I mean the enterprise of seeking fixed norms in scripture for such matters as the organization and worship of the church. These norms we have sought historically to distill from direct commands, approved examples, and necessary inferences. I now see there is indeed a pattern inculcated upon us in scripture; but his name is Jesus, and Jesus has rarely been the pattern about which we have been talking.

The overthrow of patternism would be a bold step indeed, for patternism has defined our approach to faith and practice. Not long after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, Thomas Campbell equated the New Testament to a constitution in the fourth proposition of his *Declaration and Address*: "the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline, and government of the New Testament Church . . . as the Old Testament was for . . . the Old Testament Church."³ To say that the New Testament is a constitution is essentially the same as to say it is a prescriptive pattern. Alexander Campbell entitled one of his earliest series in the *Christian Baptist*, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things."⁴ Here *order* is also virtually synonymous with *pattern*. From the earliest work of the Campbells then, ours has been a quest for patterns. The time has come, however, that we must learn to think about, read, and handle the scriptures differently than we have in the past. We must divest ourselves of the illusion that the New Testament constitutes a body of law, and learn to see that corpus as an anthology comprising diverse literary genres written for sundry purposes. Until we do so we will never successfully enter in to Paul's theology: "You are not under law, but under grace" (Rom 6:14).

Patternism was popularized in preaching and tracts by a hypothetical story about a man who took his Bible and set out to find the "right" church. He would know that church when he found a body that matched the New Testament church in all points. He visited a congregation, but when he realized they had no intention of serving communion that Sunday, he walked out in the name of Acts 20:7. He came to a second, but when Miss Bertha struck up the organ he walked on because he knew that the silence of the scriptures hermeneutically implies the prohibition of musical instruments. He came to a third and was favorably impressed until he found that they objected to graded Bible classes. Discerning that this position was culpably extreme because the silence of the scriptures does not *always* imply the prohibition of a thing, he continued his quest. At long last he chanced upon a mainstream congregation where the cornerstone read "Church of Christ—Founded AD 33" and everything matched the biblical pattern. There the

red-eyed pilgrim obeyed the gospel, placed membership, and lived faithfully ever after.

But the "right" churches of our time do not really match the churches in the New Testament. For example, at least some of the churches in the New Testament enjoyed an abundance of spiritual gifts. It is no secret that we are in the main non-charismatic. Right there one must concede that we do not *match*. It is argued, however, that we are not responsible for this difference because the Holy Spirit now withholds those gifts. Avoiding this issue, let us test the thesis that we are in every way identical to the early churches, excepting the *charismata*. Paul ordered the Corinthian sisters to veil themselves when they prayed (1 Cor 11:3ff). Our women are not known to do this. Paul castigated the Corinthians for drunkenness at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:21). This necessarily implies that the Corinthian church of Christ was using wine. Our churches are not known for this. Paul instructed Timothy to enroll specifically qualified widows for financial support (1 Tim 5:3-16). Our churches have generally not duplicated this ordinance. Paul told Titus to appoint elders (Tit 1:5). Our churches rarely accord evangelists this prerogative. Paul told Timothy to pay the elders (1 Tim 5:17-18). Our churches generally feature elder-paid evangelists, not evangelist-paid elders. Timothy probably did not pay these men out of his own pocket either, which should mean he was in control of the church funds. Where I have preached I have never been able to so much as co-sign checks. Paul told Timothy to pay those elders double that he deemed to be doing a good job (1 Tim 5:17). Paul charged Timothy to rebuke sinning elders publicly (1 Tim 5:19-20). I would counsel my preaching brothers to attempt the restoration of these last two patterns only if their résumés are ready to mail. How long need this list be to establish the fact that we do not *match* every known practice of the New Testament churches?

Yet these point only to *deficiencies* in our practice; there is yet a catalogue of matters in which we *exceed* anything said of the first century churches. We buy and sell land and church houses. We have song books and baptisteries and disposable communion cups. We now have ministry leaders, an innovation whereby we get work done when men will not fill the diaconate, and whereby we tap the marvelous talents of the sisters without calling them deacons. Today there are a number of para-church entities among us under the sponsorship of no church or eldership (the very thing opposed in the missionary society controversy a century and a half ago). Precedents for none of these things can be found in scripture. We would justify them all as "expedients,"

but our schismatic history shows that one Christian's expedient is the next Christian's taboo. There are some 19 doctrinally distinct varieties of churches of Christ in the "Key to Directory Abbreviations" of Mac Lynn's, *Churches of Christ in the United States*.⁵ (Does Jesus weep over key codes to the church?) All 19 are searching the same scriptures, and all 19 are at odds. The point is simply this: if the twentieth century churches of Christ are hardly replicas of the

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first century churches after nearly 200 years of applied patternism, is it not obvious that patternism cannot deliver what it seemed to have promised: a united church? If patternism has thus failed, if it has been "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10), then is it not time to abandon patternism in search of a better way of doing Christianity?

To be sure, patternism might be fine if we patternists could learn to charitably tolerate diversity and refrain from going to war over every divergence from our assured conclusions. But history shows that patternism tends toward a divisive, legalistic exclusivism. If others do not detect the same patterns we do, patternism forces us to judge that they can only be dishonest or dense. *That* is the problem with patternism.

Patternism proceeds from the assumption that the first century churches were themselves uniform. This was surely not the case. Acts 15 shows that the Jewish Church and the Pauline Church did not share the same steps in the plan of salvation. James alluded to his addressees' *sunagoogee* (James 2:2ff). That he meant by this a synagogue building seems implicit in the statements he quotes: "Here's a good seat," "Sit on the floor at my feet," and "Stand over there." Surely the style and mood of worship in such a Jewish Christian synagogue-church differed

from the unstructured worship in a Gentile Christian church like Corinth (1 Cor 14:26-33). Or exactly how was it again that the synagogue leaders were able to sell their Jewish peers (now that everybody was also Christian) on the necessity of packing away the instruments, removing the Torah, disregarding the Sabbath, and stopping the practice of circumcision? If Paul's salutation in Philippians 1:1 proves that Philippi was organized under overseers and deacons, does the absence of any mention of elders and deacons in the Corinthian letters prove that Corinth was organized without overseers and deacons? Why are elders and deacons not listed in 1 Corinthians 12:28? What we do is conflate the data by induction into an ideal church that never in fact existed anywhere.⁶ The point is, we cannot uniformly replicate a pattern that never uniformly existed in the first place.

Patternism assumes that the ways and means of doing business in the first century churches were supposed to be normative for all time. But where is the passage or book that clearly affirms this? What could have been, but is not, was a handbook that explicitly spelled out God's will for all such matters as church organization and acceptable worship for all time. There could have been, to illustrate the point, a III Luke. Under this scenario the Gospel would have been I Luke, Acts would have been II Luke, and III Luke might have begun something like this:

In the former books, O Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until Paul awaited trial in Rome. Now, having investigated other matters carefully, it seemed good to me to write an orderly account of the faith and practice that God has ordained for the church throughout the ages.

Chapter one might have been titled "The Five Steps of the Plan of Salvation" and chapter two "The Five Acts of Worship." Chapter three could have been "The Official Form of Church Government" and chapter four "The Complete Canon of Biblical Texts." Chapter five might happily have been, "Women's Role in the Church." What would one pay for a copy of III Luke today? Such a book would seemingly have answered all of our most troublesome questions. As a matter of fact, a document much like our imaginary III Luke did appear early in the second century AD; it is commonly called *The Didache*. The following quote is from *The Didache* "On Baptism":

The procedure for baptizing is as follows.
After rehearsing all the preliminaries,

immerse in running water 'In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'. If no running water is available, immerse in ordinary water. This should be cold if possible; otherwise warm. If neither is practicable, then sprinkle water three times on the head 'In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost'. Both baptizer and baptized ought to fast before the baptism, as well as any other who can do so; but the candidate himself should be told to keep a fast for a day or two beforehand.⁷

Someone has said *The Didache* is what patternists wish the whole New Testament had been. *The Didache* is tangible proof that such a handbook as III Luke *could* have been in the canon. For that matter, Exodus 26 is a canonical precedent for this very kind of explicit, "handbookish" communication from God. So why did God not give such a document to guide the church? Do we think God gave us a puzzle instead to see if we are clever enough to discern his will from silence? Is God by a process of "divine selection" weeding out all the people too stupid to understand closely reasoned arguments about *psaloo*? Did it ever occur that we cannot unanimously distinguish faith from opinion for the very reason that God never told us how to make that distinction? That ought to be our wake-up call that patternism may not be after all God's own method of communicating his will. The truth is, God intended Christianity to function by a fundamentally different principle from the principle of *law* that had governed Judaism.

The problem lies in our concept of the New Testament. God never intended the New Testament documents to become a book of law for the church. In the first place, not one of the constituent documents is a piece of written law *per se*. But if none of the parts is law, how can the whole be law? Exodus 22 is written law. The Code of Hammurabi is written law. But the Gospel of Mark is a gospel, a distinct literary genre that is certainly not law. The precise genre of Acts is debated, but no one contends that it is law. The Apocalypse is apocalyptic, not law. But what of the epistles? Certainly we have appealed to them as canon law. But while an epistle may reflect or apply a principle of law, an epistle itself is not a document of law. Jesus was the law-giver, not Paul or any other New Testament author. Jesus explicitly stated his new commandment: "Love one another" (John 13:34). James is clearly conscious of this as "the royal law" (James 2:8). Likewise Paul wrote that bearing each other's burdens fulfills "the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). Surely he too was thinking of the law of love. The

authors of the epistles were not legislators but interpreters, faithfully applying the love law to the situations confronting the churches and individuals to whom they wrote. The law of love is fixed, but what love means must always be circumstantially conditioned. Patternism, though, simply transforms all New Testament documents into fixed law, regardless of their original purposes or genres.

Some would appeal to 1 Corinthians 14:37 that Paul conceived himself to be a legislator: "If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command." But how shall we square the notion that every word from Paul was *lex ex cathedra* with other statements in the same letter where he says in effect, "Here is my opinion, but if you ignore my opinion, that's OK too." (1 Cor 7:25-28)? If Paul was known to be the vicar of Christ, why was his testimony not the last word at the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15? In fact, why was there a conference in the first place? Why did Paul not just fire off a letter saying, "Nix to circumcision. I have spoken.?" For that matter, however, Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:37 *did* give the faithful word of the Lord *to those people in that situation*. But to move from this to the idea that everything Paul wrote then was binding for all time regardless of circumstance or purpose is a giant step indeed.

It is almost impossible for modern Christians to enter into the fact that the church flourished for decades with no New Testament. The early church had no books save those of the Old Testament, which they certainly did not use to establish *Christian* practice. The early church was Spirit-driven, not book-driven, for the simple reason that the New Testament documents had neither been written nor canonized. Likewise, it is almost impossible for modern Christians to escape a certain amnesia about the New Testament induced by the current state of Bible manufacture. We think of the Bible as a bound volume with a standardized text speaking to us in English from cover to cover. But in the first century the codex had not been invented; books were scrolls. The corpus of the Hebrew scriptures were never written on a single scroll because of limitations inherent in scroll sizes and script sizes. This means Paul could never have conceived of his letters being bound authoritatively in-volume with the Hebrew scriptures, for the very reason that no such volume existed in the first place. This means that our fundamental concept of the Bible as a single authoritative volume would have been absolutely alien to Paul and the early church. We have inherited a concept of the Bible that only became possible with the invention of the codex, probably early in the

second century AD. It is my thesis that the codex changed Christianity. The medium altered the message, for in the process of canonization and codification the church came to have a Book where there had been none. Unwittingly and unintentionally the church began to surrender her birth right of freedom. Whereas Paul had formerly been able to say, "You are not under law, but under grace," (Rom 6:14-15), Christianity now had its own Torah... different from the first, but not so very different after all. Romans 6:14 became a curious text, for now it seemed for all the world that we Christians were under law; what did Paul mean "You are not under law."? In truth, Paul's words were comprehensible only when Christianity understood itself to be free from a written law and subject only to the living Spirit. As I said in the beginning, we will never be able to enter authentically into Paul's theology of freedom and grace until we exorcise our nomistic view of the New Testament documents.

Is this to advocate the overthrow of the Bible? No. It is to advocate that we stop the abuse of the Bible as law when it is not law. Is this to advocate antinomian behavior? No. We are subject to Christ's law, which is love. It is just as Paul said, "I myself am not under law⁸ . . . though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law" (1 Cor 9:20). The only way to save Paul from utter contradiction here is to understand him to mean that he was not under *any* written law, but he knew he was subject to the moral law and lordship of Christ.

We need then a reformation in our thinking about the scriptures. We need first to find a new center, the authentic center of scripture. We are the people who declared Acts 2 to be "the hub of the Bible."⁹ But Jesus was the center of Paul's theology,

and he must become ours as well. We need second to distinguish Jesus from Paul. Jesus was the lawgiver. Paul was the faithful interpreter of Christ's law. There is a difference. We need third to handle each New Testament document in a manner consistent with the purpose and situation for which each was written. To help us see each of the 27 documents as an independent entity, it would be helpful if the canon could be re-atomized. Unlikely? There is already a shift on the horizon, potentially as radical as the introduction of the codex: the Bible on computer. Things will be very different in years to come when the preacher thumps a silvery CD and invites his congregation to "Insert your discs and click on Ephesians with me." The medium is going to change the message once again. And in the electromagnetic world of digital data the scriptures have in a sense been re-atomized already. Fourth and last, we need to distinguish God from the Bible. The Bible points us to God, but the Bible is not God. The scriptures were never meant to be an end in themselves, but the means to the end that sinful men and women might be reconciled to holy God. The scriptures are an invitation to meet Jesus today, not just a record about people who met him 2,000 years ago. We thus need to reform our thinking about scripture lest the Lord have cause to say to us,

You searched the Scriptures because you thought in them you would find eternal life. But the Scriptures bore witness of me. Yet you refused to come to me that you might have life.

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